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'And then did the Forces of Chaos challenge Fate and the great Cosmic Balance and seek greater power on Earth through their human medium. And the Lords of Law were unable to gain entrance to the Earth and there was one man only, Elric who bore the Black Sword, and he was destined to be torn upon the rack of Time and his destiny was to destroy his world so that Law might mould it anew. Lower dipped the Balance as Chaos gained strength, weaker became Law, and only Elric who bore the Black Sword could right the Balance by his actions and the power of the Black Sword . . .'

The Chronicle of the Black Sword

DOOMED LORD'S PASSING

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

The Dreaming City no longer dreamed in splendour. The tattered towers of Imrryr were blackened husks, tumbled rags of masonry standing sharp and dark against a sullen sky. Vengeance had brought fire to the city years before, and fire had brought ruin.

Streaks of cloud, like sooty smoke, whispered across the pulsing sun so that the shouting, red-stained waters beyond

Imrryr were soiled by shadow, and they seemed to become quieter as if hushed by the black scars that rode across their ominous turbulence.

Upon a confusion of fallen masonry, a man stood watching the waves. A tall man, broad shouldered, slender at hip, a man with slanting brows, pointed, lobeless ears, high cheekbones and crimson, moody eyes in a dead white ascetic face. He was dressed in black quilted doublet and cloak, both high-collared and emphasising the pallor of his albino skin. The wind, erratic and warm, played with his cloak, fingered it and passed mindlessly on to howl through the broken towers.

Elric of Melniboné heard the howling and his memory was filled by the sweet, the malicious and melancholy melodies of Old Melniboné. He remembered, too, the other music his ancestors had created when they had elegantly tortured their slaves, choosing them for the pitch of their screams and forming them into the instruments of unholy symphonies.

Lost in this nostalgia for a while, he found something close to forgetfulness and he wished that he had never doubted the code of Melniboné, wished that he had accepted it without question and thus left his mind unsundered. Bitterly, he smiled.

Another figure appeared below him and climbed the tumbled stones to stand by his side. He was a small, red-haired man with a wide mouth and eyes that had once been bright and amused.

"You look to the East, Elric," murmured Moonglum. "You look back towards something irremediable."

Elric put his long-fingered hand on his friend's shoulder. "Where else is there to look, Moonglum, when the whole world lies shuddering beneath the heel of Chaos? What would you have me do? Look forward to days of hope and laughter, to an old age lived in peace, with children playing around my feet?" He laughed softly. It was not a laugh that Moonglum liked to hear.

"Sepiriz spoke of help from the White Lords. It must come soon. We must wait patiently." Moonglum turned to squint into the glowering and motionless sun and then, his face set in an introspective look, cast his eyes down to the rubble on which he stood.

Elric was silent for a moment, watching the waves. Then he took a deep breath and shrugged. "Why complain? It does me no good. I cannot act on my own volition. Whatever fate is before me cannot be changed. I pray that the men who follow us will make use of their ability to control their own destinies. I have no such ability." He touched his jaw-bone with his fingers and then looked at the hand, noting nails, knuckles, muscles and veins standing out on the pale skin. He ran this hand through the long, silky strands of his milk-white hair, drew another long breath and let it out in a sigh.

"Logic! The world cries for logic. I have none, yet here I am, formed as a man with mind, heart and vitals, yet formed by a chance coming together of certain elements. The world needs logic. Yet all the logic in the world is worth as much as one lucky guess. Men take pains to weave a web of careful thoughts—yet others thoughtlessly weave a random pattern and achieve the same result. So much for the thoughts of the sage."

"Ah," Moonglum winked with attempted levity, "thus speaks the wild adventurer, the cynic. But we are not all wild and cynical, Elric. Other men tread other paths—and reach other conclusions than yours."

"I tread one that's pre-ordained. Come, let's to the Dragon Caves and see what Dyvim Slorm has done to rouse our reptilian friends."

They stumbled together down the ruins and walked the shattered canyons that had once been the lovely streets of Imrryr, out of the city and along a grassy track that wound through the gorse, disturbing a flock of large ravens that fled into the air cawing, all save one, the king, who balanced himself on a bush, his cloak of ruffled feathers drawn up in dignity, his black eyes regarding them with wary contempt.

Down through sharp racks to the gaping entrance of the Dragon Caves, down the steep steps into torch-lit darkness with its damp warmth and smell of scaly reptilian bodies. Into the first cave where the great recumbent forms of the sleeping dragons lay, their folded leathery wings rising into the shadows, their green and black scales glowing faintly, their clawed feet folded and their slender snouts curled back, even in sleep, to display the long, ivory teeth that seemed like so many white stalactites. Their dilating red nostrils groaned in torpid slumber.

The smell of their hides and their breath was unmistakable, rousing in Moonglum some memory inherited from his ancestors, some shadowy impression of a time when these dragons and their masters swept across a world they ruled, their inflammable venom dripping from their fangs and heedlessly setting fire to the countryside across which they flew. Elric, used to it, hardly noticed the smell, but passed on through the first cave and the second until he found Dyvim Storm, striding about with a torch in one hand and a scroll in the other, swearing to himself.

He looked up as he heard their booted feet approach. He spread out his arms and shouted, his voice echoing through the caverns, "Nothing! Not a stir, not an eyelid flickering! There is no way to rouse them. They will not wake until they have slept their necessary number of years. Oh, that we had not used them on the last two occasions, for we have greater need of them today!"

"Neither you nor I had the knowledge we have now. Regret is useless since it can achieve nothing." Elric stared around him at the huge, shadowy forms. Here, slightly apart from the rest, lay the leading dragons, one he recognised and felt affection for; Flamefang, the eldest, who was five thousand years old and still young for a dragon. But Flamefang, like the rest, slept on.

He went up to the beast and stroked its metal-like scales, ran his hand down the ivory smoothness of its great front fangs, felt its warm breath on his body and smiled. Beside him, on his hip, he heard *Stormbringer* murmur.

He patted the blade, saying: "Here's one soul you cannot take. The dragons are indestructible. They will survive even though all the world collapses into nothing."

Dyvim Storm said from another part of the cavern: "I can't think of further action to take for the meantime, Elric. Let's go back to the tower of D'a'rputna and refresh ourselves."

Elric nodded and, together, the three men returned through the caverns and ascended the steps into the sunlight.

"So," Dyvim Storm remarked "still no nightfall. The sun has remained in that position for thirteen days. How much power must Chaos wield if it can stop the sun in its course?"

"Chaos might not have done this for all we know," Moon-glum pointed out. "Though it's likely, of course, that it did. Time has stopped. Time waits. But waits for what? More confusion, further disorder? Or the influence of the great balance which will restore order and take vengeance against those forces who have gone against its will? Or does Time wait for us—three mortal men adrift, cut off from what is happening to all other men, waiting on Time as it waits on us?"

"Perhaps the sun waits on us?" Elric agreed. "For is it not our destiny to prepare the world for its fresh course? It makes me feel a little more than a mere pawn if that's the case. What if we do nothing? Will the sun remain where it is for ever?"

They paused in their progress for a moment and stood staring up at the pulsating red disc, at the black clouds which fled across the sky before it. Where were the clouds going? Where did they come from? They seemed instilled with purpose. It was possible that they were not even clouds at all, but spirits of Chaos bent on dark errands.

Elric grunted to himself, aware of the uselessness of such speculation. He led the way back to the tower of D'a'rputna where years before he had sought his love, his cousin Cymoril, and later lost her to the ravening thirst of the blade at his side. The tower had survived the flames though the colours that had once adorned it were blackened by fire.

Here he left his friends and went to his own room to fling himself, fully clad, upon the soft Melnibonéan bed and, almost immediately, fell asleep.

t w o

Elric slept and Elric dreamed and, though he was aware of the unreality of his visions, his attempts to rouse himself to wakefulness were entirely futile. Soon he ceased trying and merely let his dream form itself and draw him into its bright landscape.

He saw Imrryr as it had been centuries before. Imrryr, the same city he had known until he led the raid on it and caused its destruction. The same—yet with a different, brighter appearance as if it were newly-built. As well, the

colours of the surrounding countryside were richer, the sun darker orange, the sky deep blue and sultry. Since then, he realised slowly, the very tints of the world had faded with the planet's ageing.

People and beasts moved in the shining streets: tall, eldritch Melnibonéans, men and women walking with grace, like proud tigers; hard-faced slaves with hopeless, stoic eyes, long-legged horses of a type now extinct, small mastadons drawing gaudy cars. Clearly on the breeze came the mysterious scents of the place, the muted sounds of activity—all hushed, for the Melnibonéans hated noise as much as they loved harmony. Heavy silk banners flapped from the scintillating towers of bluestone, jade, ivory, crystal and polished red granite. And Elric moved in his sleep and ached to be there among his own ancestors, the golden folk who had dominated the old world.

Monstrous galleys passed through the water-maze which led to Imrryr's inner harbour, bringing the best of the world's booty, tax gathered from all parts of the Bright Empire. And across the azure sky lazy dragons flapped their way towards the caves where thousands of the beasts were stabled, unlike the present where scarcely a hundred remained. In the tallest tower—the Tower of B'aal'nezbett, the Tower of Kings—his ancestors had studied sorcerous lore, conducted their malicious experiments, indulged their sensuous appetites—not decadently as men of the Young Kingdoms might behave, but according to their native instincts.

Elric knew that he looked upon the ghost of a now-dead city. And he seemed to pass beyond the Tower's gleaming walls and see his emperor-ancestors indulging in drug-sharpened conversation, lazily sadistic, unashamedly (for there were no morals to make them feel ashamed) sporting with demon-women, torturing, investigating the peculiar metabolism and psychology of the enslaved races, delving into mystic lore, absorbing a knowledge which few men of the later periods could experience without falling insane.

But it was clear that this must either be a dream or vision of a nether world which the dead of all ages inhabited, for here were emperors of many different generations. Elric knew them from their portraits: Black-ringletted Rondar IV, twelfth emperor, sharp-eyed, imperious Elric I, eightieth emperor, horror-burdened Kahlan VII, three-hundred-and-

twenty-ninth emperor. A dozen or more of the mightiest and wisest of his four-hundred-and-twenty-seven ancestors, including Trelahi, the Green Empress, who had ruled the Bright Empire from the year 8406 after its foundation until 9011. Her longevity and green-tinged skin and hair had marked her out. She had been a powerful sorceress even by Melni-bonéan standards. She was also reputed the daughter of a union between Emperor Iuntric X and a demon.

Elric, who saw all these, as if from a darkened corner of the great main chamber, observed the shimmering door of black crystal open and a newcomer enter.

Elric started and again attempted to wake himself, with no success. The man was his father Sadric the eighty-sixth, a tall man with heavy-lidded eyes and a misery in him. He passed through the throng as if they or he did not exist. He walked directly towards Elric and stopped two paces from him. He stood looking at him, the eyes peering upwards from beneath the heavy lids and prominent brow. He was a gaunt-faced man who had been disappointed in his albino son. He had a sharp, long nose, sweeping cheek-bones and a slight stoop because of his unusual height. He fingered the old red velvet of his robe with his thin, beringed hands. Then he spoke in a clear whisper which, Elric remembered, it had always been his habit to employ.

"My son, are you, too, dead? I thought I'd been here but a fleeting moment and yet I see you changed in years and with a burden on you that time and fate have placed there. How did you die? In reckless combat on some upstart's foreign blade? Or in this very tower in your ivory bed? And what of Imrryr now? Does she fare well or ill, dreaming in her decline of past splendour? The line continues, as it must—I will not ask you if that part of your trust was kept. A son, of course, born of Cymoril whom you loved, for which your cousin Yyrkoon hated you."

"Father —"

The old man raised a hand that seemed almost transparent with age.

"There is another question I must ask of you. One that has troubled all who spend their immortality in this shade of a city. Some of us have noticed that the city itself fades at times and its colours dim, quivering as if about to vanish.

Companions of ours have passed even beyond death and, perhaps, I shudder to contemplate, into non-existence. Even here, in the timeless region of death, unprecedented changes manifest themselves and, those of us who've dared ask the question and also give its answer, fear that some tumultuous event has taken place in the world of the living. Some event which, so great is it, that even here we are affected and our souls' extinction threatened. A legend says that until the Dreaming City dies, we ghosts may inhabit its earlier glory. Is that the news you bear to us? Is this your message? For I note on clearer observation that your body lives still and this is merely your astral body released for a while to wander the halls of the dead."

"Father—" but already the vision was fading; already he was withdrawing back down the bellowing corridors of the cosmos, through planes of existence unknown to living men, away, away . . .

"Father — !" he called and his own voice echoed, but there was none there to make reply. And in some sense at least he was glad, for how could he answer the poor spirit and reveal to him the truth of his guesses, admit the crimes he himself was guilty of against his ancestral city, against the very blood of his forefathers? All was mist and groaning sorrow as his echoes boomed into his ears, seeming to take on their own independence and warp the word into weirder sounds: "Fa-a-a-a-th-e-e-r-r . . . A-a-a-a-v-a-a . . . A-a-a-a-h-a-a-a-a . . . R-a-a-a . . . D-a-ra-va-ar-a-a . . . !"

Still, though he strove with all his being, he could not rouse himself from slumber, but felt his spirit drawn through other regions of smokey indeterminacy, through patterns of colour beyond his earthly spectrum, beyond his mind's conception.

A huge face began to take form in the mist.

"Sepiriz!" Elric shouted, recognising the face of his mentor. But the black Nihrain, disembodied, did not appear to hear him. "Sepiriz—are *you* dead?"

The face faded then, re-appeared almost at once upon the rest of the man's tall frame.

"Elric, I have discovered you at last, robed in your astral body I see. Thank Fate, for I thought I had failed to summon you. Now we must make haste. A breach has been made in the defences of Chaos and we go to confer with the Lords of Law!"

"Where are we?"

"Nowhere as yet. We travel to the Higher Worlds. Come, hurry. I'll be your guide."

Down, down, through pits of softest wool that engulfed and comforted, through canyons that were cut between blazing mountains of light, through caverns of infinite blackness wherein their bodies shone and Elric knew that the dark nothingness went away in all directions for ever.

And then they seemed to stand upon a horizonless plateau, perfectly flat with occasional green and blue geometric constructions rising from it. And there, too, were things in human form—things which had assumed such shape for the benefit of the men who now encountered them.

The White Lords of the Higher Worlds, enemies of Chaos. Marvellously beautiful with bodies of such symmetry that they could not be earthly. Only Law could create such perfection and, Elric thought, such perfection defeated further creation, just as Chaos's random pattern-making defeated progress. That the twin forces complemented one another was now plainer than ever before, and for either to gain complete ascendancy over the other meant entropy or stagnation for the cosmos. Even though Law might dominate the Earth, Chaos *must* be present, and vice versa.

The Lords of Law were accoutred for war. They had made this apparent in their choice of earth-like garb. Fine metals and silks—or their like on this plane—gleamed on their perfect bodies. Slender weapons were at their sides and their overpoweringly beautiful faces seemed to glow with purpose. The tallest stepped forward.

"So, Sepiriz, you have brought the one whose destiny it is to aid us. Greetings, Elric of Melniboné. Though spawn of Chaos you be, we have cause to welcome you. I am the one whom your earthly mythology calls Donblas the Justice Maker."

In his astral body, Elric attempted a bow. "Hail, Lord Donbas. You are misnamed, I fear, for justice is nowhere present in the world."

"You speak of your world as if it were all worlds." Donblas smiled without rancour, though it appeared that he was unused to such impudence from a mortal. Elric was insouciant, for he had had too many dealings with the Dark Lords of the Higher Worlds to grant either side much

deference. Also, his ancestors had been opposed to Donblas and all his brethren, and it was still hard to consider the White Lord an ally.

"I see now how you have managed to defy our opponents," Lord Donblas continued with approval. "And I grant you that justice cannot be found on Earth at this time. But I am named the Justice *Maker* and have still the will to make it when conditions change on your plane."

Elric nodded, not looking directly at Donblas for the sight of his beauty was disturbing. "Then let's to work, my lord, and change the World as soon we may. Let's bring the novelty of justice to our sobbing world."

"Haste, mortal, is impossible here! "

It was another White Lord speaking, his pale yellow surcoat rippling over the clear steel of breastplate and greaves, the single Arrow of Law emblazoned on it.

"I'd thought the breach to Earth made," Elric frowned. "I'd thought this marshal sight a sign that you prepared war against Chaos! "

"War is prepared—but not possible until the summons comes from Earth."

"From *Earth!* Has not Earth screamed for your aid? Have we not worked sorceries and incantations to bring you to us? What further summons do you need? "

"The ordained one," said Lord Donblas firmly.

"The ordained one? Gods! (You'll pardon me, my lords) Is further work required of me, then? "

"One last great task, Elric," said Sepiriz softly. "As I have told you, Chaos blocks the attempts of the White Lords to gain access to our World. The Horn of Fate must be blown thrice before this business is fully terminated. The first blast will wake the Dragons of Imrryr, the second will allow the White Lords entrance to the earthly plane, the third—" he paused.

"The third—yes, the third? " Elric spoke impatiently.

"The third will herald the death of the old world! "

"So be it. Where lies this mighty horn? "

"In one of several possible futures," said Sepiriz. "A device of this kind cannot be made in our phase, therefore it has had to be constructed in a phase where logic rules over sorcery. You must journey to the future and there locate the Horn of Fate."

“And how can I accomplish such a journey?”

Once again Lord Donblas spoke levelly. “We will give you the means. Equip yourself with sword and shield of Chaos, for they will be of some use to you, though not so powerful as in your world. Go you then to the highest point on the ruined Tower of B’aal’nezbett in Imrryr and then step off into space. You will not fall—unless what little power we retain on Earth fails us utterly.”

“Comforting words, my Lord Donblas,” smiled Elric. “Very well, I shall do as you decree, to satisfy my own curiosity if naught else.”

Donblas shrugged. “This is only one of many future worlds—almost as much a shadow as your own—but you may not approve of it. You will notice its sharpness, its clearness of outline—that will indicate that Time has exerted no real influence upon it, that its structure has not been mellowed by many events. However, let me wish you safe passage, mortal, for I like you—and I have cause to thank you, too. Though you be of Chaos, you have within you several of the qualities we of Law admire. Go now. Return to your mortal body and prepare yourself for the venture ahead of you.”

Elric bowed again and glanced at Sepiriz. The black Nihrain stepped back three paces and disappeared. Elric followed him.

Once again their astral bodies ranged the myriad planes of the supernatural universe, experiencing sensations unfamiliar to the physical mind, before, quite without warning, Elric felt suddenly heavy and opened his eyes to discover that he was in his own bed in the tower of D’a’rputna. Through the faint light filtering between chinks in the heavy curtain thrown over the window-slit, he saw the round Chaos Shield, its eight-arrowed symbol pulsating slowly as if in concert with the sun, and beside it his unholy runeblade *Storm-bringer*, lying against the wall as if already prepared for their journey into the might-be world of a possible future.

Then Elric slept again, more naturally, and was tormented, also, by more natural nightmares so that at last he screamed in his sleep and woke himself to find Moonglum standing by the bed. There was an expression of sad concern upon his narrow face.

"What is it, Elric? What ails your slumber? "

He shuddered. "Nothing. Leave me, Moonglum, and I'll join you when I rise."

"There must be reason for such shouting. Some prophetic dream, perhaps? "

"Aye, prophetic sure enough. I thought I saw a vision of my thin blood spilt by a hand that was my own. What import has this dream, what moment? Answer that, good friend and, if you can't, then leave me to my morbid bed until these thoughts are gone."

"Come, rouse yourself, Elric. Find forgetfulness in action. The candle of the fourteenth day burns low and Dyvim Storm awaits your good advice."

The albino pulled himself upright and swung his trembling legs over the bed. He felt enfeebled, bereft of energy.

Moonglum helped him rise. "Throw off this troubled mood and help us in our quandary," he said with a hollow levity that made the fears in him more plain.

"Aye," Elric straightened himself. "Hand me my sword, I need its stolen strength."

Unwillingly Moonglum went to the wall where stood the two unholy weapons, took the runeblade by its scabbard, shuddering as it seemed to titter faintly at him, and presented it hilt first to his friend. Gratefully, Elric seized it, was about to pull it from the sheath when he paused.

"Best leave the room before I free the blade."

Moonglum understood at once and left, not anxious to trust his life to the whim of the hell-sword.

When he was gone, Elric unsheathed *Stormbringer* and at once felt a faint tingle as its supernatural vitality began to stream into his nerves. Yet it was scarcely adequate and he knew that if the blade did not feed soon upon the life-stuff of other men it would seek the souls of one or both of his two remaining friends. He replaced it thoughtfully in the scabbard, buckled it around his waist and strode to join Moonglum in the curved stone corridor.

In silence they proceeded down the twisting marble steps of the tower until they reached the centre level where the main chamber was.

Here Dyvim Storm was seated, a bottle of old Melnibonéan wine on the table before him, a large silver bowl in his hands. His sword *Mournblade* was on the table beside the bottle.

They had found the store of wine in the secret cellars of the place, missed by the sea-reavers whom Elric had led upon Imrryr when he and his cousin fought on opposite sides. The bowl was full of the congealed mixture of herbs, honey and barley which their ancestors had used to sustain themselves in times of need. Dyvim Slorm was brooding over it, but looked up when they came close and sat themselves on chairs opposite him.

He smiled slowly, hopelessly.

"I fear, Elric, that I have done all I can to rouse our sleeping friends. No more is possible—and they still slumber."

Elric frowned, remembering the details of his vision and half-afraid that it had been merely a figment of his own imaginings, supplying the fantasy of hope where, in reality, no hope was.

"Forget the dragons, for a while at least. Last night I left my body, so I thought, and journeyed to places beyond the Earth, eventually to the White Lords' plain where they told me how I might rouse the dragons by blowing upon a horn. I intend to follow their directions and seek that horn."

Dyvim Slorm replaced the bowl upon the table. "We'll accompany you, of course."

"No need—and anyway impossible—I'll have to go alone. Wait for me until I return and if I do not—well, you must do what you decide, spending your remaining years imprisoned on this isle, or going to battle with Chaos."

"I have the idea that time has stopped in truth and if we stay here we shall live on forever and shall be forced to face the resulting boredom," Moonglum put in. "If you don't return, I for one will ride into the conquered realms to take a few of our enemies with me to limbo."

"As you will," Elric said. "But wait for me until all your patience is ended, for I know not how long I'll be."

He stood up and they seemed a trifle startled as if they had not until then understood the import of his words.

"Fare you well, then, my friend," said Moonglum.

"How well I fare depends on what I meet where I go," Elric smiled. "But thanks, Moonglum. Fare *you* well, good cousin, do not fret. Perhaps we'll wake the dragons yet."

"Aye," Dyvim Slorm said with a sudden resurgence of vitality, "we shall! We shall And their fiery venom will

spread across the filth that Chaos brings, burning it clean! That day *must* come or I'm no prophet at all! "

Infected by this unexpected enthusiasm, Elric felt an increase of confidence, saluted his friends, smiled, and walked upright from the chamber, ascending the marble stairs to take the Chaos Shield from its place and go down to the gateway of the tower and pass through it, walking the jagged streets towards the magic-sundered ruin that had once been the scene of his dreadful vengeance and unwitting murder—the Tower of B'aal'nezbett.

t h r e e

"For the mind of Man alone is free to explore the lofty vastness of the cosmic infinite, to transcend ordinary consciousness, or roam the subterranean corridors of the human brain with its boundless dimensions. And universe and individual are linked, the one mirrored in the other, and each contains the other."

The Chronicle of the Black Sword.

Now, as Elric stood before the broken entrance of the tower, his mind was beset with bursting thoughts which fled about his skull, made overtures to his convictions and threatened to send him hopelessly back to rejoin his companions. But he fought them, forced them down, forget them, clung to his remembrance of the White Lord's assurance and passed into the shadowed shell which still had the smell of burnt wood and fabric about its blackened interior.

This tower, which had formed a funeral pyre for the murdered corpse of his first love Cymoril and his warped cousin, her brother Yyrkoon, had been gutted of innards. Only the stone stairway remained and that, he noted, peering into the gloom through which rays of sunlight slanted, had collapsed before it reached the roof.

He dare not think, for thought might rob him of action. Instead, he placed a foot upon the first stair and began to climb. As he did so a faint sound entered his ears, or it may have been that it came to him from within his mind. However it reached his consciousness it sounded like a far-away orchestra tuning itself. As he climbed higher, the sound mounted, rhythmic yet discordant until, by the time he

reached the final step still left intact, it thundered through his skull, pounded through his body producing a sensation of dull pain.

He paused and stared downward to the tower's floor far below. Fears beset him. He wondered whether Lord Donblas had intended him to climb to the highest point he could easily reach, or the actual point which was still some twenty feet above him.

He decided it was best to take the White Lord literally and swinging the great Chaos Shield upon his back reached above him and got his fingers into a crack in the wall, which now sloped gently inwards.

He heaved himself up, his legs dangling and his feet seeking a hold. He had always been troubled by heights and disliked the sensation that came to him as he glanced down to the rubble-laden floor, eighty-feet below, but he continued to climb and the climb was made easier by the fissures in the tower's wall.

Though he expected to fall, he did not and at last reached the unsafe roof, easing himself through a hole and on to the sloping exterior. Bit by bit he climbed until he was on the highest part of the tower.

Then, fearing hesitation still, he stepped outwards, over the festering streets of Imrryr far below.

The discordant music stopped. A roaring note replaced it. Swirling waves of red and black rushed towards him and then he had burst through them to find he was standing on firm turf beneath a small, pale sun, the smell of grass in his nostrils. He noted that, whereas the ancient world seen in his dream had seemed more colourful than his own, this world, in turn, contained even less colour though for some reason it appeared to be cleaner in its outlines, in sharper focus. And the breeze that blew against his face was colder.

He began to walk over the grass towards a thick forest of low, solid foliage which lay ahead.

He reached the perimeter of the forest but did not enter, circumnavigating it until he came to a stream that went off into the distance, away from the forest.

He noticed, with curiosity, that the bright, clear water appeared not to move. It was frozen, though not by any natural process that he recognised. It had all the attributes of a summer stream—yet it did not flow.

Feeling that this phenomenon contrasted strangely with the rest of the scenery, he swung the round Chaos Shield on to his arm, drew his throbbing sword and began to follow the stream.

The grass gave way to gorse and rocks with the occasional clump of waving ferns of a variety he didn't recognise.

Ahead he thought he heard the tinkle of water, but here the stream was still frozen.

As he passed a rock taller than the rest he heard a voice above him:

"Elric of Melniboné!"

He looked up.

There on the rock stood a young dwarf with a long, brown beard that reached below his waist. He clutched a spear, his only weapon, and he was clad in russet breeks and jerkin with a green cap on his head and no shoes on his broad, naked feet. He had eyes like quartz that were at once hard, harsh and humorous.

"That's my name," Elric said quizzically. "Yet if this be the world of the future, how is it you know me?"

"I am not of this world myself—at least, not exactly. I have no existence in time as you know it, but move here and there in the shadow worlds that the gods make. It is my nature to do so. In return for allowing me to exist, the gods sometimes use me as a messenger. My name is Jermays the Crooked, as unfinished as these worlds themselves."

He began to clamber down the rock and soon stood beside Elric, looking up at him.

"What's your purpose here?" Elric asked.

"Methought you sought the Horn of Fate."

"True. Know you where it lies?"

"Aye," the young dwarf smiled sardonically. "It's buried with the still-living corpse of a hero of this age—a knight they call Roland."

"An outlandish name."

"No more than yours to other ears. Roland, save that his life was not so doom beset, is your counterpart in his own land. He met his death in a valley not far from here, trapped and betrayed by a fellow knight. The horn was with him then and he blew it once before he died. Some say that the echoes still resound through the valley, and will resound forever, though Roland perished many years ago. The horn's full purpose is unknown here—and was unknown even to

Roland. It is called *Olifant* and, with his magic sword *Durandana*, was buried with him in the monstrous grave mound that you see yonder."

The dwarf pointed into the distance and Elric saw that he indicated something he had at first taken to be a large hillock.

"And what must I do to gain this horn?" he asked.

The dwarf grinned with a hint of malice in his voice. "You must match that bodkin there 'gainst Roland's *Durandana*. His was consecrated by the Forces of Light whereas yours was forged by the Forces of Darkness. It should be an interesting conflict."

"You say he's dead—then how can he fight me?"

"He wears the horn by a thong about his neck. If you attempt to remove it, he will defend his ownership, waking from the deathless sleep that seems to be the lot of most heroes in this world."

Elric nodded and then smiled. "It seems to me they must be short of heroes if they have to preserve them in the manner you've described."

"Perhaps," the dwarf answered carelessly, "for there are a dozen or more who lie sleeping somewhere on this continent alone. They are supposed to awaken only when a desperate need arises, yet I've known terrible things to happen and still they have slept. It could be they await the end of their world which the gods may destroy if it proves unsuitable, in which case they will fight to prevent such an occurrence. It is merely a poorly conceived theory of my own and of little weight."

The dwarf bobbed a cynical bow and, hefting his spear, saluted Elric. "Farewell, Elric of Melniboné. When you wish to return I will be here to lead you—and return you must, whether alive or dead, for, though you may not be aware of it, your very presence, your physical appearance itself, contradicts its present environment. Only one thing fits here . . ."

"What's that?"

"Your sword."

"My sword. Strange, I should have thought that would be the last thing." He shook a growing idea out of his mind. He did not have time to speculate. "I've no liking to be here," he commented as the dwarf clambered over the rocks.

He glanced in the direction of the great burial mound and began to advance towards it.

Beside him he saw that the stream was moving naturally and he had the impression that though Law dominated this world it was to some extent still forced to deal with the disrupting forces of Chaos.

The grave barrow, he could now see, was fenced about with giant slabs of unadorned stone. Beyond the stones were olive trees that had dull jewels hanging from their branches and beyond them, through the leafy apertures, Elric saw a tall curved entrance blocked by gates of brass embossed with gold.

"Though strong, *Stormbringer*," he said to his sword, "I wonder if you'll be strong enough to war in this world as well as giving my body vitality. Let's test you."

He advanced to the gate and drawing back his arm delivered a mighty blow upon it. The metal rang and a dent appeared. Again he struck and the gates shook, but then a voice cried from his right.

"What demon would disturb dead Roland's rest? "

"Who speaks the language of Melniboné? " Elric retorted boldly.

"I speak the language of demons. I know of no Mulne-booney and am well-versed in the ancient mysteries."

"A proud boast for a woman," said Elric who had not yet seen the speaker. She emerged, then, from around the barrow, and stood staring at him from out of her glowing green eyes. She had a long, beautiful face and was almost as pale as himself though her hair was jet black.

"What's your name? " he asked. "And are you a native of this world? "

"I am named Vivian, an enchantress but earthly enough. Your Master knows the name of Vivian who once loved Roland, though he was too upright to indulge her, for she is immortal and a witch." She laughed good-humoredly. "Therefore I am familiar with demons of your like and do not fear you. Aroint thee! Aroint thee—or shall I call Bishop Turpin to exorcise thee? "

"Some of your words," said Elric courteously, "are unfamiliar and the speech of my folk much garbled. Are you some guardian of this hero's tomb? "

"Self-made guardian, aye. Now go!" She pointed towards the stone slabs.

"I am afraid that it is not possible. The corpse within has something of value to me. The Horn of Fate we call it, but you know it by another name."

"Olifant! But that's a blessed instrument. No demon would dare touch it. Even I . . ."

"I am no demon. I'm sufficiently human, I swear. Now stand aside. This cursed door resists my efforts too well."

"Aye," she said thoughtfully. "You could be a man—though an unlikely one. But the white face and hair, the red eyes, the tongue you speak . . ."

"Sorcerer I be, but no demon. Please—stand aside."

She looked carefully into his face and her look disturbed him. He took her by her shoulder. She felt real enough, yet somehow not quite as solid as he'd expected.

He half-whispered: "What knowledge could you have of my language? Is this world a dream of mine or of the gods? It seems scarcely tangible. Why?"

She heard him. "Say you so of us? What of your ghostly self? You seem an apparition from the dead past!"

"From the past! Aha—and *you* are in my future, as yet unformed. Perhaps that brings us to a conclusion?"

She did not pursue the topic but said suddenly: "Stranger, you will never break this door down. If you can touch Olifant that speaks of you as mortal, despite your appearance. You must need the horn for an important task."

Elric smiled. "Aye—for if I do not take it back from whence it came, you will never exist."

She frowned. "Hints! Hints! I feel close to a discovery, yet cannot grasp why and that's unusual for Vivian. Here—" she took a big key from her gown and offered it to him—"this is the key to open Roland's tomb. It is the only one. I had to kill to get it, but oftimes I venture into the gloom of his grave to stare down at his face and pine that I might revive him and keep him living forever on my island home. Take the horn! Rouse him—and when he has slain you, he will come to me and my warmth, my offer of everlasting life, rather than lie in that cold place again. Go — slain by Roland!"

He took the key.

"Thanks, Lady Vivian. If it were possible to convince one who in truth did not yet exist, I would tell you that Roland's

slaying of me would be worse for you than if I am successful."

He put the large key in the lock and it turned easily. The doors swung open and he saw that a long, low-roofed corridor twisted before him. Unhesitatingly, he advanced down it towards a flickering light that he could see through the cold and misty gloom.

Yet, as he walked, it was as if he glided in a dream less real than that he had experienced the previous night.

Now he entered the funeral chamber illuminated by tall candles surrounding the bier of a man who lay upon it dressed in armour of a crude and unfamiliar design, a huge broadsword gripped to his chest and, upon the hilt, attached to his neck by a silver chain — the Horn of Fate, *Olifant!*

The man's face, seen in the candlelight, was strange; old and yet with a youthful appearance, the brow smooth and the features unlined.

Elric put *Stormbringer* in his left hand and reached out to grasp the horn. He made no attempt at caution but wrenched it off Roland's neck.

A great roar came from the hero's throat. Immediately he had raised himself to a sitting position, the sword shifting into his two hands, his legs swinging off the bier. His eyes widened as he saw Elric with the horn in his hands and he jumped at the albino, the sword *Durandana* whistling downwards towards Elric's head. He raised the shield and blocked the blow, slipped the horn into his jerkin and, backing away, returned *Stormbringer* to his right hand.

Roland was now shouting something in a language completely unfamiliar to Elric. He did not bother trying to understand, since the angry tones were sufficient to tell him the knight was not suggesting a peaceful negotiation.

He continued defending himself without once carrying the offensive to Roland, backing inch by inch down the long tunnel towards the barrow's mouth. Every time *Durandana* struck the Chaos Shield both sword and shield gave out wild notes of great intensity.

Implacably the hero continued to press Elric backwards, his broadsword whirling and striking the shield, sometimes the blade, with fantastic strength. Then they had broken into daylight and Roland seemed momentarily blinded. Elric

glimpsed Vivian watching them eagerly for it seemed that Roland was winning.

However, in daylight and with no chance of avoiding the angered knight, Elric retaliated with all the energy he had been saving until this moment. Shield high, sword swinging, he now took the attack, surprising Roland who was evidently unused to this behaviour on the part of an opponent. *Storm-bringer* seemed to snarl as it bit into Roland's poorly-forged armour of iron, rivetted with big unsightly nails, painted on the front with a dull red cross that was a scarcely adequate insignia for so famous a hero.

But there was no mistaking *Durandana's* powers for, though seemingly as crudely forged as the armour, it did not lose its edge and threatened to bite through the Chaos Shield with every stroke. Elric's left arm was numb from the blows and his right arm ached. Lord Donblas had not lied to him when he had said that the strength of his weapons would be diminished in this world.

Then Elric rushed in and crashed his shield against Roland's body. The knight reeled and staggered, his sword giving off a keeping note. Elric struck at a gap between Roland's helmet and gorget. The head sprang off the shoulders and rolled grotesquely away, but no blood pumped from the jugular. The eyes of the head remained open, staring at Elric.

Vivian screamed and shouted something in the same language which Roland had used. Elric stepped back, his face grim.

"Oh, his legend, his legend!" she cried. "The only hope the people have is that Roland will some day ride once more to their aid. Now you have slain him! Fiend!"

"Possessed I may be," he said quietly as she sobbed by the headless corpse, "but I was ordained by the gods to do this work. I'll take my leave of your drab world, now."

"Have you no sorrow for the crime you've done?"

"None, madam, for this is only one of many such acts which, I'm told, serve some greater purpose. That I sometimes doubt the truth of his consolation need not concern you. Farewell."

And he walked away from there. Passed through the olive grove and the tall stones, the Horn of Fate cold against his heart.

He followed the river towards the high rock where he saw a small figure poised and, when he reached it, looked up at the young dwarf Jermays the Crooked, took the horn from his jerkin and displayed it.

Jermays chuckled. "So Roland is dead for all time now, and you, Elric, have left a fragment of a legend in this world. Well, shall I escort you back to your own world?"

"Aye, and hurry."

Jermays skipped down the rocks and stood beside the tall albino.

"Hmm," he mused, "that horn could prove troublesome to us. Best replace it in your jerkin and keep it covered by your shield."

Elric obeyed the dwarf's suggestion and followed him down to the banks of the strangely frozen river. It looked as if it should have been moving but it evidently was not. Jermays leapt into it and, incredibly, began to sink.

"Quickly," he called, "follow!"

Elric stepped in after him and for a moment stood on the frozen water before he began to sink.

Though the stream was shallow, they continued to sink until all similarity to water was gone and they were passing down into rich darkness that became warm and heavy-scented. Jermays pulled at his sleeve. "This way!" and they shot off at right-angles, darting from side to side, up and down, through a maze that apparently only Jermays could see. Against his chest, the horn seemed to heave and he pressed his shield to it. Then he blinked as he found himself in the light again, staring at the great red sun throbbing in the dark blue sky. His feet were on something solid. He looked and saw that it was the Tower of B'aal'nezbett. For a while longer the horn heaved as if alive, like a trapped bird but, after some moments, it became quiescent.

Elric lowered himself to the roof and began to edge down it until he came to the gap through which he had passed earlier.

Then suddenly he looked up as he heard a noise in the sky overhead. There, his feet planted on air, stood grinning Jermays the Crooked.

"I'll be passing on, for I like not this world at all," he said. He chuckled. "It has been a pleasure to have had a part in this. Goodbye, Elric. Remember me, the unfinished one, to the Lords of the Higher Worlds—and perhaps you

could hint to them that the sooner they improve their memories or else their creative powers, the sooner I shall be happy."

Elric said: "Perhaps you'd best be content with your lot, Jermays. There are disadvantages to roots, too."

Jermays shrugged and vanished.

Slowly, all but spent, Elric descended the fractured wall and, with great relief, reached the first stair to stumble down them and run back to the Tower of D'aar'putna with the news of his success.

four

The three thoughtful men left the city and went down to the Dragon Caves. On a new silver chain, the Horn of Fate was slung around Elric's neck. He was dressed in black leather with his head unprotected save for a gold circlet that kept his hair from his eyes. *Stormbringer* scabbarded at his side, the Chaos Shield slung on his back, he led his companions into the grottoes, to come eventually to the slumbering bulk of Flamefang the Dragon Leader.

His lungs seemed to have insufficient capacity as he drew air into them and grasped the horn. Then he glanced at his friends who regarded him expectantly, straddled his legs slightly and blew with all his strength into the horn.

The note sounded, deep and sonorous, and as it reverberated through the caverns, he felt all his vitality draining from him. Weaker and weaker he became until he sank to his knees, the horn still at his lips, the note failing, his vision dimming, his limbs shaking, and then he sprawled face down on the rock, the horn clattering beside him.

Moonglum dashed towards him and then gasped as he saw the bulk of the leading dragon stir and one huge, unblinking eye, as cold as the northern wastes, stare at him.

Dyvim Storm yelled jubilantly. "Flamefang! Brother Flamefang, you wake!"

All about him he saw the other dragons stirring also, shaking their wings and straightening their slender necks, ruffling their horny crests.

Moonglum felt smaller than usual as the dragons awakened. He began to feel nervous of the huge beasts, wondering how they would respond to the presence of one who was not a

Dragon Master. Then he remembered the enervated albino and knelt beside Elric, touching his leathern-covered shoulder.

"Elric! D'you live? "

Elric groaned and tried to turn over on to his back. Moon-glum helped him sit upright.

"I'm weak, Moonglum—so weak I can't rise. The horn took all my energy! "

"Draw your sword—it will supply what you need."

Elric shook his head. "I'll take your advice, though I doubt whether you're right this time. That hero I slew must have been soulless or else his soul was well-protected, for I gained nothing from him."

His hand fumbled towards his hip and grasped *Storm-bringer's* hilt. With a tremendous effort he drew it from the scabbard and felt a faint flowing leave it and enter him, but not enough to allow him any great exertion. He got up and staggered towards Flamefang.

The monster recognised him and rustled its wings by way of welcome, its hard, solemn eyes seeming to warm slightly. As he moved round to pat its neck, he staggered and fell to one knee, rising with effort.

In earlier times there had been slaves to saddle the dragons, but now they must saddle all ninety-eight of the beasts between them and Elric knew he could be of little help.

Dyvim Storm took his arm and led him to a corner of the cavern. "Rest here, cousin—we'll do this work. Will you have strength enough to lead us? "

Elric sighed. "Aye—enough, I think, for that. But I know I'll have none for the ensuing battle. There must be *some* means of gaining vitality."

"What of the herbs you once used? "

"Those I had have lost their properties, and there are no fresh ones to be found now that Chaos has warped plant, rock and ocean with its dreadful stamp."

Dyvim Storm turned away with a wry face and busied himself with the saddling.

The dragons must have understood that Moonglum was a friend of their masters for they did not demur when he cautiously approached to dress them with their high wooden saddles with silver stirrups and sheathed lance-like goads from which were draped the pennants of the noble families of Melniboné, now all dead.

After several hours of this labour they had completed the saddling and Elric saw them approach him through the flimmering shadows. He put down the cup of liquid Dyvim Slorm had brought him in an attempt to revivify him. Leaning one hand against the uneven rock for support he stood up.

"Bring straps," he ordered, making his way with difficulty towards the impatiently trembling Flamefang.

"Straps?" Dyvim Slorm frowned.

"Aye. If I'm not secured in my saddle, I'll likely fall to the ground before we've flown a mile."

So he climbed into the tall saddle and gripped the goad which bore his blue, green and silver pennant, gripped it in his gauntleted hand and sat proudly in his seat until they came with the straps and bound him firmly in place. He gave a slight smile and shook the dragon's reins. "Forward, Flamefang, lead the way for your brothers and sisters."

With folded wings and lowered head, the dragon began to walk its slithering way to the exit.

Behind it, on two dragons almost as large, sat Dyvim Slorm and Moonglum, their faces grimly concerned, watchful for Elric's safety.

As Flamefang moved with rolling gait through the series of caverns, its fellow beasts fell in behind it until all of them had reached the great mouth of the last cave which overlooked the threshing sea.

The sun was still in its position overhead, seeming to swell in rhythm with the movement of the waves.

With a shout that was half-hiss, half-yell, Elric slapped at Flamefang's neck with his goad.

"Up, Flamefang! Up for Melniboné and vengeance!"

As if sensing the strangeness of the world, Flamefang paused on the brink of the ledge, shaking its head and snorting to itself. Then, as it launched into the air, its wings began to beat, their fantastic spread flapping with slow grace but bearing the beast along with marvellous speed.

Up, up beneath the swollen sun, up into the hot, turbulent air, up towards the east where the camps of hell were waiting. And in Flamefang's wake came its two brother-dragons bearing Moonglum and Dyvim Slorm who had a horn of his own, the one used to direct the dragons. Ninety-five other dragons, males and females, darkened the deep blue sky, all green, red and gold, scales clashing and flashing, wings beating and, in concert, sounding like the throbbing of a million

drums as they flew over the unclean waters with gaping jaws and cold, cold eyes.

Though beneath him now Elric saw with blurred eyes many colours of immense richness, they were all dark and changing constantly, shifting from one extreme of the spectrum to the other. It was not water down there now—it was a fluid comprised of materials both natural and supernatural, real and abstract. Pain, longing, misery and laughter could be seen as tangible fragments of the tossing tide, passions and frustrations lay in it also, as well as stuff made of living flesh that bubbled on occasions to the surface.

In his weakened condition, the sight of the fluid sickened Elric and he turned his red eyes upwards and towards the east as the dragons moved swiftly on their course.

Soon they were flying across what had once been the mainland of the eastern continent, the major Vilmirian peninsula. But now it was bereft of its earlier qualities and huge columns of dark mist rose into the air so that they were forced to guide their reptilian steeds among them. Lava streamed, bubbling, on the far-away ground, disgusting shapes flitted over land and air; monstrous beasts and the occasional group of weird riders on skeletal horses who looked up when they heard the beat of the dragon wings and rode in frantic fear towards their camps.

Of mankind, nothing was left save the three mounted on the dragons.

Elric knew that Jagreen Lern and his human allies had long-since forsaken their humanity and could no longer claim kinship with the species their hordes had swept from the world. The leaders alone might retain their human shape, the Dark Lords don it, but their souls were warped just as the bodies of their followers had become warped into hell-shapes due to the transmuting influence of Chaos.

All the dark power of Chaos lay upon the world, yet deeper and deeper into its heart went the dragon flight with Elric swaying in his saddle and only stopped from falling by the straps that bound his body.

From the lands below there seemed to rise an aching shriek as tortured nature was defied and its components forced into alien forms.

Onward they sped towards what had once been Karlaak

by the Weeping Waste and which was now the Camp of Chaos.

Then, from above, they heard a cawing yell and saw black shapes dropping down on them.

Elric had not even strength to cry out but weakly tapped Flamefang's neck and made the beast veer away from the danger. Moonglum and Dyvim Storm followed his example and Dyvim Storm sounded his horn, ordering the dragons not to engage the attackers, but some of the dragons in the rear were too late and were forced to turn and battle with the black phantoms.

Elric looked behind him and, for a few seconds, saw them outlined against the sky, rending things with the jaws of whales, locked in combat with the dragons that shot their flaming venom at them and tore at them with teeth and claws, wings flapping as they strove to hold their height, but then another wave of dark green mist spread across his field of vision and he did not see the fate that befell the dozen dragons.

Now Elric signalled Flamefang to fly low over a small army of riders fleeing through the tormented land, the eight-arrowed standard of Chaos flapping from the leader's encrusted lance.

Down they went and loosed their venom, having the satisfaction of seeing the beasts and riders scream, burn and perish, their ashes absorbed into the shifting ground.

Here and there, now, they saw a gigantic castle, newly-raised by sorcery, perhaps as a reward for some traitor king who had aided Jagreen Lern. They left them burning with unnatural fires, the gouting smoke blending with the shredding mist.

And at last Elric saw the Camp of Chaos—a city but recently made in the same manner as the castles, the flaring sign of Chaos hanging amber in the sky overhead.

Yet he felt no elation, only despair that he was so weak he would not have the strength to meet his enemy Jagreen Lern in combat. What could he do? How could strength be found—for, even if he took no part in the fighting, he must have sufficient vitality to blow the horn a second time and summon the White Lords to Earth.

The city seemed peculiarly silent as if waiting or preparing for something. It had an ominous atmosphere and Elric,

before Flamefang crossed the perimeter, made his dragon steed turn and circle.

Dyvim Slorm and Moonglum and the rest of the dragon flight followed his example and Dyvim Slorm called across the air to him.

"What now, Elric? I had not expected a *city* to be here so soon!"

"Neither had I. But look—" he pointed with a trembling hand he could hardly lift, "there's Jagreen Lern's merman standard. And there—" now he pointed to the left and right, "the standards of a score of the Dukes of Hell! Yet I see no other human standards!"

Moonglum shouted: "Those castles we destroyed. I suspect that Jagreen Lern has already divided up these sundered lands and given them to his hirelings. How can we tell how much time has really passed—time in which all this could have been brought about?"

"True," Elric nodded, looking up at the still sun. He lurched forward in his saddle, half-fainting, pulled himself upright, breathing heavily. The Chaos Shield seemed like a huge weight on his arm, but he held it warily before him.

Then he acted on impulse and goaded Flamefang into speed so that the dragon rushed towards the city, diving down towards the castle of Jagreen Lern.

Nothing sought to stop him and he landed the beast on the turrets of the castle. Silence was dominant. He looked around, puzzled, but could see nothing save the towering buildings of dark stone that seemed to ooze beneath Flamefang's feet.

The straps stopped him from dismounting but he saw enough to be sure that the city was deserted. Where was the horde of hell? Where was Jagreen Lern?

Dyvim Slorm and Moonglum came to join him while the rest of the dragons circled above. Claws scratched on rock, wings slashed the air and they settled, turning their mighty heads this way and that, ruffling their scales restlessly for, once aroused from their slumber, the dragons preferred the air to the land.

Dyvim Slorm stayed but long enough to mutter: "I'll scout the city," and then was flying away again, low among the castles until they heard him cry out and saw him swoop out of sight.

There came a yell, but they could not see what caused it, a pause, and then Dyvim Slorm's dragon was flapping up again and they saw he had a writhing prisoner slung over the front of his saddle.

He landed. The thing he had captured bore resemblance to a human being but was misshapen and ugly with a jutting underlip, low forehead and no chin; huge, square, uneven teeth bristled in its mouth and its bare arms were covered in woolly hair.

"Where are your masters?" Dyvim Slorm demanded.

The thing seemed to possess no fear, but chuckled. "They predicted your coming and, since the city limits movement, have assembled their armies on a plateau they have made five miles to the north east." It turned its dilated eyes to Elric. "Jagreen Lern sent greetings and said he anticipated your foolish downfall."

Elric shrugged.

Dyvim Slorm drew his own runeblade and hacked the creature down. He shivered as the thing's soul-stuff blended with his own and passed extra energy to him. Then he cursed and looked at Elric's with pain in his eyes.

"I acted in haste—I should have given him to you."

Elric said nothing to this but whispered in his failing voice: "Let's to their battle-field. Hurry!"

Up to join their flight they went again, into the rushing, populated air and towards the north east.

It was with astonishment that they sighted Jagreen Lern's horde for they could not understand how it could have managed to regroup itself so swiftly. Every fiend and warrior on Earth seemed to have come to fight beneath the theocrat's standard.

It clung like a vile disease to the undulating plain. And around it clouds grew darker even though lightning, obviously not of truly natural origin, blossomed and shouted, criss-crossing the plain.

Into this noisy agitation swept the dragon flight and they recognised the force commanded by Jagreen Lern himself for his banner flew above it. Other divisions were commanded by Dukes of Hell—Malohin, Zhortha, Xiombarg and others. Also he noted the three mightiest Lords of Chaos, dwarfing the rest. Chardos the Reaper, with his great herd and his curving scythe, Mabelode the Faceless with his face always in

shadow no matter which way you looked at it, and Slortar the Old, slim and beautiful, reputed the oldest of all the gods. This was a force which a thousand powerful sorcerers would find it hard to defend against and the thought of attacking them seemed folly.

Elric did not bother to consider this for he had embarked on his plan and was committed to carrying it through even though, in his present condition, he was bound to destroy himself if he continued.

They had the advantage of attacking from the air, but this would only be of value while the dragons' venom lasted. When it gave out, they must go in closer. At that moment Elric would need a lot of energy—and he had none.

Down swept the dragons, shooting their incendiary venom into the ranks of Chaos.

Normally no army could stand against such an attack but, protected by sorcery, Chaos was able to turn much of the fiery venom harmless. The venom seemed to spread against an invisible shield and dissipate. Some of it struck its target, however, and hundreds of warriors were engulfed in flame and died blazing.

Again and again the dragons rose and dived upon their enemies, Elric swaying almost unconscious in his saddle, his awareness of what was going on diminishing with every attack.

His dimming vision was further encumbered by the stinking smoke that had begun to rise off the battle-field.

From the horde, huge lances were rising with seeming slowness, lances of Chaos like streaks of amber lightning striking at the dragons so that the beasts hit bellowed and hurtled dead to the ground.

Closer and closer Elric's steed bore him until he was flying over the division commanded by Jagreen Lern himself. He caught a misty glimpse of the theocrat sitting a repulsive, hairless horse and waving his sword, convulsed with mocking mirth. He faintly heard his enemy's voice drift up to him.

"Farewell, Elric—this is our last encounter, for today you go to limbo!"

Elric turned Flamefang about and whispered into his ear: "That one, brother—that one!"

With a roar, Flamefang loosed his venom at the laughing theocrat. It seemed to Elric that Jagreen Lern must surely

be burned to ashes but, just as the venom seemed to touch him, it was hurled back and only a few drops struck some of the theocrat's retainers, igniting their clothing.

Still Jagreen Lern laughed and now he released an amber spear which had appeared in his hand. Straight towards Elric it went and, with difficulty, the albino put up his Chaos Shield to deflect it.

So great was the force of the bolt striking his shield that he was hurled backwards in his saddle and one of the straps securing him snapped so that he fell to the left and was only saved by the other strap that had held.

Now he crouched behind the shield's protection as it was battered with supernatural weapons. Flamefang, too, was encompassed by the shield's great power; but how long would even the Chaos Shield resist such an attack?

It seemed that he was forced to use the shield for an infinite time before Flamefang's wings cracked the air like whips and he was rushing high above the horde.

He was dying.

Minute by minute the vitality was leaving him as if he were an old man ready for death.

"I cannot die," he muttered, "I must not die. Is there no escape from this dilemma?"

Flamefang seemed to hear him. The dragon descended towards the ground again and dropped until its scaly belly was scraping the lances of the horde.

Then Flamefang had landed on the unstable ground and waited with folded wings as a group of warriors goaded their beasts towards him.

Elric gasped: "What have you done, Flamefang? Is nothing dependable? You have delivered me into the hands of the enemy!"

With great effort he drew his sword as the first lance struck his shield and the rider passed, grinning, sensing Elric's weakness. Others came on both sides. Weakly, he slashed at one and *Stormbringer* seemed to take control to make the aim true. The rider's arm was pierced and he was locked to the blade as it fed, greedily, upon his life-stuff.

Immediately Elric felt some slight return of strength and realised that between them—dragon and sword—they were helping him gain the energy he needed. But the blade seemed to keep the most part to itself. There was a reason for this

as Elric found out at once, for the sword continued to direct his arm.

Several more riders were slain in this manner and Elric grinned as he felt vitality flowing back into his body. His vision cleared, his reactions became normal, his spirits rose. Now he carried the attack to the rest of the division, Flamefang moving over the ground with a speed belying his bulk. The warriors scattered and flew back to rejoin the main force, but Elric no longer cared, he had the souls of a dozen of them and it was enough.

"Now up, Flamefang! Rise and let us seek out more powerful enemies!"

Obediently Flamefang spread his wings. They began to flap and bear him off the ground, gliding low over the horde.

In the midst of Lord Xiombarg's division, Elric landed again, dismounted from Flamefang and, possessed of his supernatural energy, rushed into the ranks of fiendish warriors, hewing about him, invulnerable to all but the strongest attack of Chaos. Vitality mounted and a kind of battle-madness with it. Further and further into the ranks he sliced his way, until he saw Lord Xiombarg in his earthly guise of a slender, dark-haired woman. Elric knew that the woman's shape was no indication of Xiombarg's mighty strength but, without fear, he leapt towards the Duke of Hell and stood before him, looking up at where he sat on his lion-headed, bull-bodied mount.

Xiombarg's girl's voice came sweetly to Elric's ears. "Mortal, you have defied many Dukes of Hell and banished others back to the Higher Worlds. They call you god-slayer, so I've heard. Can you slay me?"

"You know that no mortal can slay one of the Lords of the Higher Worlds whether they be of Law or Chaos, Xiombarg—but he can, if equipped with sufficient power, destroy their earthly semblance and send them back to their own plane, never to return!"

"Can you do this to me?"

"Let us see!" yelled Elric and flung himself towards the Dark Lord!

Xiombarg was armed with a long-shafted battle-axe that gave off a night-blue radiance. As his steed reared, he swung the axe down at Elric's unprotected head. The albino flung up his shield and the axe struck it. A kind of metallic shout

came from the weapons and huge sparks flew away. Elric moved in close and hacked at one of Xiombarg's feminine legs. A light moved down from his hips and protected the leg so that *Stormbringer* was brought to a stop, jarring Elric's arm. Again the axe struck the shield with the same effect as before. Again Elric tried to pierce Xiombarg's unholy defence. And all the while he heard the Dark Lord's laughter, sweetly modulated, yet as horrible as a hag's.

"Your mockery of human shape and human beauty begins to fail, my lord!" cried Elric, standing back for a moment to gather his strength.

Already the girl's face was writhing and changing as, disconcerted by Elric's power, the Duke of Hell spurred his beast down on the albino.

Elric dodged aside and struck again. This time *Stormbringer* throbbed in his hand as it pierced Xiombarg's defence and the Dark Lord moaned, retaliating with another axe-blow which Elric barely succeeded in blocking.

He turned his beast, the axe rushing about his head as he whirled it and flung it at Elric with the intention of striking him in the head.

Elric ducked and put up his shield, the axe clipping it and falling to the shifting ground. He ran after Xiombarg who was once again turning his steed. From nowhere he had produced another weapon, a huge double-handed broadsword, the breadth of its blade triple that of even the largest earthly sword. It seemed incongruous in the small, delicate hands of the girl-shape. And its size, Elric guessed, told something of its power. He backed away warily, noting absently that one of the Dark Lord's legs was missing and replaced by an insect-like mandible. If he could only destroy the rest of Xiombarg's disguise, he would have succeeded in banishing him.

Now Xiombarg's laughter was no longer sweet, but had an unhinged note. The lion-head roared in unison with its master's voice as it rushed towards Elric. The monstrous sword went up and crashed upon the Chaos Shield. Elric fell on his back, feeling the ground itch and crawl beneath him, but the shield was still in one piece. He caught sight of the bull-hooves pounding down on him, drew himself beneath the shield, leaving only the sword-arm free. As the beast thundered above, seeking to crush him with its hooves, he

thrust upwards into its belly. The sword was initially halted and then seemed to pierce through whatever obstructed it and draw out the life-force. The vitality of the unholy beast passed from sword to man and Elric was taken aback by its strange, insensate quality for the soul-stuff of an animal was different from that of an intelligent protagonist. He rolled from under the beast's bulk and sprang to his feet as the lion-bull collapsed, hurling Xiombarg's still-earthly shape to the ground.

Instantly the Dark Lord was up, standing with a peculiarly unbalanced stance with one leg human and the other alien. It limped swiftly towards Elric, bringing the huge sword round in a sideways movement that would slice Elric in two. But Elric, full of the energy gained from Xiombarg's steed, leapt back from the blow and struck at the sword with *Stormbringer*. The two blades met, but neither gave. *Stormbringer* seemed to shriek in anger for it was unused to resistance of this kind. Elric got the rim of his shield under the blade and forced it up. For an instant Xiombarg's guard was open and Elric used that instant with effect, driving *Stormbringer* into the Dark Lord's breast with all his strength.

Xiombarg whimpered and at once his earthly shape began to dissolve as Elric's sword sucked his energy into itself. Elric knew that this energy was only that fraction constituting Xiombarg's life-force on this plane, that the major part of the Dark Lord's soul was still in the Higher Worlds for not even the most powerful of these godlings could summon the power to transport all of himself to the Earth. If Elric had taken every scrap of Xiombarg's soul, his own body could not have retained it but would have burst. However, so much more powerful was the force flowing into him from the wound he had made than any human soul, that he was once again the vessel for a mighty energy.

Xiombarg changed. He became little more than a flickering coil of coloured light which began to drift away and finally vanish as Xiombarg was swept back to his own plane.

Elric looked upwards. He was horrified to see that only a few of the dragons survived. One was fluttering down now and it had a rider on its back. From that distance he could not see which of his friends it was.

He began to run towards the place where it fell.

He heard the crash as it came to ground, heard a weird wailing, a bubbling cry and then nothing.

He battled his way through the milling warriors of Chaos and none could withstand him until he came at last to the fallen dragon. There was a broken body lying on the ground beside it, but of the runeblade there was no sign. It had vanished.

It was the body of Dyvim Slorm, last of his kinsmen.

There was no time for mourning. Elric and Moonglum with the bare score of remaining dragons could not possibly win against Jagreen Lern's strength which was hardly touched by the attack.

Standing over the body of his cousin, he placed the Horn of Fate to his lips, took a huge breath and blew. The clear, melancholy note of the horn rang out over the battle-field and seemed to carry in all directions, through all the dimensions of the cosmos, through all the myriad planes and existences, through all eternity to the ends of the universe and the ends of time itself.

The note took long moments to fade and, when it had at last died away, there was an absolute hush over the world, the milling millions were still, there was an air of expectancy.

And then the White Lords came.

f i v e

It was as if some enormous sun, a million times larger than Earth's, had sent a ray of light pulsing through the cosmos, defying the flimsy barriers of time and space, to strike upon that great black battle-field. And along it, appearing on the pathway that the horn's weird power had created for them, strode the majestic Lords of Law, their earthly forms so beautiful that they challenged Elric's sanity, for his mind could scarcely absorb the sight. They disdained to ride, like the Lords of Chaos, on bizarre beasts, but moved without steeds, a magnificent assembly with their mirror-clear armour and rippling surcoats bearing the single arrow of Law.

Leading them came Donblas the Justice Maker, a smile upon his perfect lips. He carried a slender sword in his right hand, a sword that was straight and sharp and like a beam of light itself.

Elric moved swiftly then, rushed to where Flamefang awaited him and urged the great reptile into the moaning air.

Flamefang moved with less ease than earlier but Elric did not know whether it was because the beast was tired or whether the influence of Law was weighing on the dragon which was, after all, a creation of Chaos.

But at last he flew beside Moonglum and, looking around, saw that the remaining dragons had turned and were flying back to the west. Only their own steeds remained. Perhaps the last of the dragons had sensed their part played and were returning to the Dragon Caves to sleep again.

Elric and Moonglum exchanged glances but said nothing, for the sight below them was too awe-inspiring to speak of.

A light, white and dazzling, spread from the midst of the Lords of Law, the beam upon which they had come faded, and they began to move towards the spot where Chardros the Reaper, Mabelode the Faceless and Slortar the Old and the lesser Lords of Chaos had assembled themselves, ready for the great fight.

As the White Lords passed through the other denizens of hell and the polluted men who were their comrades, these creatures backed away screaming, falling where the radiance touched them. The dross was being cleaned away without effort—but the real strength in the shape of the Dukes of Hell and Jagreen Lern was still to be encountered.

Though at this stage the Lords of Law were scarcely taller than the human beings, they seemed to dwarf them and even Elric, high above, felt as if he were a tiny figure, scarcely larger than a fly. It was not their *size* so much as the implication of vastness which they seemed to carry with them.

Flamefang's wings beat wearily as he circled over the scene. All around him the dark colours were now full of clouds of lighter, softer shades.

The Lords of Law reached the spot where their ancient enemies were assembled and Elric heard Lord Donblas's voice carry up to him.

"You of Chaos have defied the edict of the Cosmic Balance and sought complete dominance of this planet. Destiny denies you this—for the Earth's life is over and it must be resurrected in a new form where your influence will be weak."

A sweet, mocking voice came from the ranks of Chaos. It was the voice of Mabelode the Faceless. "You presume too much, brother. The fate of the Earth has not yet been finally decided. Our meeting will result in that decision—nothing else. If we win, Chaos shall rule. If you succeed in banishing us, then paltry Law bereft of possibility will gain ascendancy. But we shall win — though Fate herself complain!"

"Then let this thing be settled," replied Lord Donblas, and Elric saw the shining Lords of Law advance towards their dark opponents.

The sky itself shook as they clashed. The air cried out and the Earth appeared to tilt. Those lesser beings left alive scattered away from the conflict and a sound like a million throbbing harpstrings, each of a subtly varied pitch, began to emanate from the warring gods.

Elric saw Jagreen Lern leave the ranks of the Dukes of Hell and ride in his flaming scarlet armour, away from them. He realised, perhaps, that his impertinence would be swiftly rewarded by death.

Elric sent Flamefang soaring down and he drew *Storm-bringer*, yelling the theocrat's name and shouting challenges.

Jagreen Lern looked up, but he did not laugh this time. He increased his speed until, as Elric had already noted, he saw toward what he was riding! Ahead, the Earth had turned to misty black and purple gas that danced frenetically as if seeking to free itself from the atmosphere. Jagreen Lern halted his horse and drew his war-axe from his belt. He raised his flame-red buckler which, like Elric's, was treated against sorcerous weapons.

The dragon hurtled groundwards and flapped to Earth a few yards from where Jagreen Lern sat his hairless horse, waiting, fatalistically, for Elric to attack. Perhaps he sensed that their fight would mirror that of the larger fight going on around them, that the outcome of the one would be reflected in the outcome of the other? Whatever it was, he did not indulge in his usual braggadocio but waited in silence.

Careless whether Jagreen Lern had the advantage or not, Elric dismounted and spoke to Flamefang in a purring murmur.

"Back, Flamefang, now. Back with your brothers. Whatever comes to pass, if I win or lose, your part is over." As Flamefang stirred and turned his huge head to look into Elric's face, another dragon descended and landed a short distance away. Moonglum, too, dismounted, beginning to advance through the black and purple mist.

Elric shouted to him: "I want no help in this, Moonglum!"

"I'll give you none. But it will be my pleasure to see you take his life and soul!"

Elric looked at Jagreen Lern whose face was still impassive.

Flamefang's wings beat and he swept up into the sky and was soon gone, the other dragon following. He would not return now.

Elric stalked towards the theocrat, his shield high and his sword ready. Then, with astonishment, he saw Jagreen Lern dismount from his own grotesque steed and slap its hairless rump to send it galloping away.

He stood waiting, slightly crouched in a position which emphasised his high-shouldered, lop-sided stance. His long, dark face was taut and his eyes fixed on Elric as the albino came closer. An unstable smile of anticipation jerked at the theocrat's lips and his eyes flickered.

Elric paused just before he came within sword-reach of his enemy.

"Jagreen Lern, are you ready to pay for the crimes you've committed against me and the world?"

"Pay? Crimes? You surprise me, Elric, for I see you have fully absorbed the carping attitude of your new allies. In my conquests I have found it necessary to eliminate a few of your friends who sought to stop me. But that was to be expected. I did what I had to and what I intended—if I have failed now, I have no regret, for regret is a fool's emotion and useless in any capacity. Will you have triumph if you slay me?"

Elric shook his head. "My perspectives have, indeed, changed, Jagreen Lern. Yet we of Melniboné have always been a vengeful brood at best—and vengeance is what I claim!"

"Ah, now I understand you." Jagreen Lern changed his stance and he raised his axe to the defensive position. "I am ready!"

Elric leapt at him, *Stormbringer* shrieking through the air to crash against the scarlet buckler and crash again. Three blows he delivered before Jagreen Lern's axe sought to wriggle through his defence and he halted it by a sideways movement of the Chaos Shield. The axe succeeded only in grazing his arm near the shoulder.

Elric's shield clanged against Jagreen Lern's and Elric attempted to exert his weight and push the theocrat backwards, meanwhile stabbing around the rims of the locked shields and trying to penetrate Jagreen Lern's guard.

For some moments they remained in this position while the music of the battle sounded around them and the ground seemed to fall from under them, columns of blossoming colours erupting, like magical plants, on all sides.

Then Jagreen Lern jumped back, slashing at Elric. The albino rushed forward, ducked and struck at the theocrat's leg near the knee—and missed. From above, the axe clashed down and he flung himself to one side to avoid it. Carried off-balance by the force of the blow, Jagreen Lern staggered and Elric leapt up and kicked at the small of the theocrat's back. The man fell sprawling, losing his grip on both axe and shield as he tried to do many things at once and failed to do anything. Elric put his heel on the theocrat's neck and held him there, *Stormbringer* hovering greedily over his prone enemy.

Jagreen Lern heaved his body round so that he looked up at Elric. He was suddenly pale and his eyes were fixed on the black hellblade when he spoke hoarsely to Elric.

"Finish me now. There's no place for my soul in all eternity—not any more. I must go to limbo—so finish me!"

Elric was about to allow *Stormbringer* to plunge itself into the defeated theocrat when he stayed the weapon, holding it back from its prey with difficulty. The runesword murmured in frustration and tugged in his hand.

"No," he said slowly, "I want nothing of yours, Jagreen Lern. I would not pollute my being by feeding off your soul. Moonglum!" He called to his friend who ran up. "Moonglum, hand me *your* blade."

Silently, the little Eastlander obeyed. Elric sheathed the resisting *Stormbringer*, saying to it: "There—that's the first time I've stopped you from feeding. What will you do now, I wonder?" Then he took Moonglum's blade and

slashed it across Jagreen Lern's cheek, opening it up in a long, deep cut which began slowly to fill with blood.

The theocrat screamed.

"No, Elric — kill me!"

With an absent smile, Elric slashed the other cheek.

His bloody face contorted, Jagreen Lern shouted for death, but Elric continued to smile his vague, half-aware smile, and said softly: "You sought to imitate the Emperors of Melniboné, did you not? You mocked Elric of that line, you tortured him and you abducted his wife. You moulded her body into a hell-shape—as you moulded the rest of the world. You slew Elric's friends and challenged him in your impertinence. But you are nothing—you are more of a pawn than I ever was. Now, little man, know how the folk of Melniboné toyed with such upstarts in the days when they ruled the world!"

Jagreen Lern took an hour to die and only then because Moonglum begged Elric to finish him swiftly.

Elric handed Moonglum's tainted sword back to him after wiping it on a shred of fabric that had been part of the theocrat's robe. He looked down at the mutilated body and stirred it with his foot. Then he looked away to where the Lords of the Higher Worlds were embattled.

He was badly weakened from the fight and also from the energy he had been forced to exert to return the resisting *Stormbringer* to its sheath, but this was forgotten as he stared in wonder at the gigantic battle.

Both the Lords of Law and those of Chaos had become huge and misty as their earthly mass diminished and they continued to fight in human shape. They were like half-real giants, fighting everywhere now—on the land and above it. Far away on the rim of the horizon he saw Donblas the Justice Maker engaged with Chardros the Reaper, their outlines flickering and spreading, the slim sword darting and the great scythe sweeping.

Unable to participate, unsure which side was winning, Elric and Moonglum watched as the intensity of the battle increased and, with it, the slow dissolution of the gods' earthly manifestation. The fight was no longer merely on the Earth but seemed to be raging throughout all the planes of the cosmos and, as if in unison with this transformation, the Earth

appeared to be losing its form until Elric and Moonglum drifted in the mingled swirl of air, fire, earth and water.

The Earth had dissolved—yet still the Lords of the Higher Worlds battled over it!

The stuff of the Earth alone remained, but unformed. Its components were still in existence, but their new shape was undecided. The fight continued. The victors would have the privilege of re-forming the Earth.

s i x

At last, though Elric did not know how, the turbulent dark gave way to light, and there came a noise—a cosmic roar of hate and frustration—and he knew that the major forces of Chaos had been defeated and banished. The Lords of Law victorious, Fate's plan had been achieved, though it still required the last note of the horn to bring it to its required conclusion.

And Elric realised he did not have the strength left to blow the horn the third time.

About the two friends the world was taking on a distinct shape again. They found they were standing on a rocky plain and in the distance were the slender peaks of new-formed mountains, purple against a mellow sky.

Then the Earth began to move. Faster and faster it whirled, day giving way to night with incredible rapidity, and then it began to slow until the sun was again all but motionless in the sky, moving with something like its customary speed.

The change had taken place. Law ruled here now, yet the Lords of Law had departed without thanks.

And though Law ruled, it could not progress until the horn was blown for the last time.

"So it's all over," Moonglum murmured. "All gone—Elwher my birth-place, Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, Bakshaan, Tanelorn—even the Dreaming City and the Isle of Melniboné. They no longer exist, they cannot be retrieved. And this is the new world formed by Law. It looks much the same as the old."

Elric, too, was filled with a sense of loss, knowing that all the places that were familiar to him, even the very continents were gone and replaced by different ones. It was like the loss

of childhood and perhaps that was what it was—the passing of the Earth's childhood.

He shrugged away the thought and smiled. "I'm supposed to blow the horn for the final time if the Earth's new life is to begin. Yet I haven't the strength. Perhaps Fate is to be thwarted after all?"

Moonglum looked at him strangely. "I hope not, friend."

Elric sighed. "We are the last two left Moonglum, you and I. It is fitting that even the mighty events that have taken place have not harmed our friendship, have not parted us. You are the only friend whose company has not worn on me, the only one I have trusted."

Moonglum grinned a shadow of his old, cocky grin. "And where we've shared adventures I've usually profited if you have not. The partnership has been complementary. I shall never know why I chose to share your destiny—perhaps it was no doing of mine, but Fate's for there is one final act of friendship I can perform . . ."

Elric frowned and was about to question Moonglum when a quiet voice came from behind them.

"I bear two messages. One of thanks from the Lords of Law—and another from a more powerful entity."

"Sepiriz!" Elric turned to face his mentor. "Well, are you satisfied with my work?"

"Aye—greatly." Sepiriz's face was sad and he stared at Elric with a look of profound sympathy. "You have succeeded in everything but the last act which is to blow the Horn of Fate for the third time. Because of you the world shall know progression and its new people shall have the opportunity to advance by degrees to a new state of being."

"But what is the meaning of it all?" Elric said. "That I have never fully understood."

"Who can? Who can know why the Cosmic Balance exists, why Fate exists and the Lords of the Higher Worlds? There seems to be an infinity of space and time and possibilities. There may be an infinite number of beings, one above the other, who see the final purpose though, in infinity, there can be no final purpose. Perhaps all is cyclic and this same event will occur again and again until the universe is run down and fades away as the world we knew has faded. Meaning, Elric? Do not seek that, for madness lies in such a course."

"No meaning, no pattern. Then why have I suffered all this?

"Perhaps even the gods seek meaning and pattern and this is merely one attempt to find it. Look —" he waved his hands to indicate the newly-formed Earth. "All this is fresh and moulded by logic. Perhaps the logic will control the newcomers, perhaps a factor will occur to destroy that logic. The gods experiment, the Cosmic Balance guides the destiny of the Earth, men struggle and credit the gods with knowing why they struggle—but do the gods know?"

"You disturb me further when I had hoped to be comforted," Elric sighed.

"I am sorry. I have come to wish you farewell, my friend. Do what you must."

"No, for we are both truly dead. Our age has gone."

Sepiriz seemed to twist in the air and disappear.

A cold silence remained.

At length Elric's thoughts were interrupted by Moonglum. "You must blow the horn, Elric. Whether it means nothing or much—you must blow it and finish this business forever!"

"How? I have scarcely enough strength to stand on my feet."

"I have decided what you must do. Slay me with *Stormbringer*. Take my soul and vitality into yourself—then you will have sufficient power to blow the last blast."

Elric was shocked. "Kill you, Moonglum! The only one left—my only true friend? You babble!"

"I mean it. You must, for there is nothing else to do. Further, we have no place here and must die soon at any rate. You told me how Zarozinia gave you her soul—well, take mine, too!"

"I cannot."

Moonglum took a pace towards him and reached down to take *Stormbringer's* hilt, pulling it half-way from the sheath.

"No, Moonglum! No!"

But now the sword seemed to spring from the sheath on its own volition. Elric struck Moonglum's hand away and gripped the hilt. But now he could not stop it. The sword rose up, dragging his arm with it, poised to deliver a blow.

Moonglum stood with his arms by his sides, his face expressionless, though Elric thought he glimpsed a flicker

of fear in the eyes. He struggled to control the blade but knew it was impossible.

"Let it do its work, Elric!"

The blade plunged forward and pierced Moonglum's heart. His blood sprang out and covered it. His eyes blurred and filled with horror, he gasped, "Ah, no ... I ... had ... not ... expected *this!*"

Petrified, Elric could not tug the sword from his friend's heart. Moonglum's energy began to flow up its length and course into his body yet, even when all the little Eastlander's vitality was absorbed, Elric remained staring at the small corpse until the tears began to flow down his white cheeks and a great sob racked him. Then the blade came free.

He flung it away from him and it did not clatter on the rocky ground but landed as a body might land. Then it seemed to move towards him and stop and he had the suspicion that it was watching him.

He took the horn and put it to his lips. He blew the blast to herald in the night of the new Earth. The night that would precede the new dawn. And though the horn's note was triumphant, Elric was not. He stood full of infinite loneliness and infinite sorrow, his head tilted back as the sound rang on. And, when the note faded from triumph to a dying echo that expressed something of Elric's misery, a huge outline began to form in the sky above the earth, as if summoned by the horn.

It was the outline of a gigantic hand holding a balance and, as he watched, the balance began to right itself until each side was true.

And somehow this relieved Elric's sorrow as he released his grip on the Horn of Fate.

"There *is* something, at least," he said, "and if it's illusion, then it's a comforting one."

He turned his head to one side and saw the blade leave the ground, sweep into the air and then rush down on him.

"*Stormbringer!*" he cried and then the hellsword struck his chest, he felt the icy touch of the blade against his heart, reached out his fingers to clutch at it, felt his body constrict, felt it sucking his soul from the very depths of his being, felt his whole personality being drawn into the runesword. He knew, as his life faded to combine with the sword's, that it had always been his destiny to die in this manner.

With the blade he had killed friends and lovers, stolen their souls to feed his own waning strength. It was as if the sword had always used him rather than the opposite, as if he was merely a manifestation of *Stormbringer* and was now being taken back into the body of the blade which had never been a true sword. And, as he died, he wept again, for he knew that the fraction of the sword's soul which was his, would never know rest but was doomed to immortality.

Elric of Melniboné, last of the Bright Emperors, cried out, and then his body collapsed, a sprawled husk beside its comrade, and he lay beneath the mighty balance that still hung in the sky.

Then *Stormbringer's* shape began to change, writhing and curling above the body of the albino finally to stand astraddle it.

The entity that was *Stormbringer*, last manifestation of Chaos which would remain with this new world as it grew, looked down on the corpse of Elric of Melniboné and smiled.

"Farewell, friend. I was a thousand times more evil than thou!"

And then it leapt from the Earth and went spearing upwards, its wild voice laughing mockery at the Cosmic Balance, filling the universe with its unholy joy.

michael moorcock

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THE DEEP FIX

BY JAMES COLVIN

o n e

Quickening sounds in the early dusk. Beat of hearts, surge of blood.

Seward turned his head on the bed and looked towards the window. They were coming again. He raised his drug-wasted body and lowered his feet to the floor. He felt nausea sweep up and through him. Dizzily, he stumbled towards the window, parted the blind and stared out over the white ruins.

The sea splashed far away, down by the harbour, and the mob was again rushing through the overgrown streets towards the Research Lab. They were raggedly dressed and raggedly organised, their faces were thin and contorted with madness, but they were numerous.

Seward decided to activate the Towers once more. He walked shakily to the steel-lined room on his left. He reached out a grey, trembling hand and flicked down three switches on a bank of hundreds. Lights blinked on the board above the switches. Seward walked over to the monitor-computer and spoke to it. His voice was harsh, tired and cracking.

"GREEN 9/7—0 Frequency. RED 8/5—B Frequency." He didn't bother with the other Towers. Two were enough to deal with the mob outside. Two wouldn't harm anybody too badly.

He walked back into the other room and parted the blind again. He saw the mob pause and look towards the roof where the Towers GREEN 9/7 and RED 8/5 were already beginning to spin. Once their gaze had been fixed on the Towers, they couldn't get it away. A few saw their companions look up and these automatically shut their eyes and dropped to the ground. But the others were now held completely rigid.

One by one, then many at a time, those who stared at the Towers began to jerk and thresh, eyes rolling, foaming at the mouth, screaming (he heard their screams faintly)—exhibiting every sign of an advanced epileptic fit.

Seward leaned against the wall feeling sick. Outside, those who'd escaped were crawling round and inching down the street on their bellies. Then, eyes averted from the Towers, they rose to their feet and began to run away through the ruins.

"Saved again," he thought bitterly.

What was the point? Could he bring himself to go on activating the Towers every time? Wouldn't there come a day when he would let the mob get into the laboratory, search him out, kill him, smash his equipment? He deserved it, after all. The world was in ruins because of him, because of the Towers and the other Hallucinomats which he'd perfected. The mob wanted its revenge. It was fair.

Yet, while he lived, there might be a way of saving something from the wreckage he had made of mankind's minds. The mobs were not seriously hurt by the Towers. It had been the other machines which had created the real damage. Machines like the Paramats, Schizomats, Engramoscopes, even Michelson's Stroboscope Type 8. A range of instruments which had been designed to help the world and had, instead, virtually destroyed civilisation.

The memory was all too clear. He wished it wasn't. Having lost track of time almost from the beginning of the disaster, he had no idea how long this had been going on. A year, maybe? His life had become divided into two sections: drug-stimulated working-period; exhausted, troubled, tranquilised sleeping-period. Sometimes, when the mobs saw the inactive Towers and charged towards the laboratory, he had to protect himself. He had learned to sense the coming of a mob. They never came individually. Mob hysteria had become the universal condition of mankind—for all except Seward who had created it.

Hallucinomatics, neural stimulators, mechanical psychosimulatory devices, hallucinogenic drugs and machines, all had been developed to perfection at the Hampton Research Laboratory under the brilliant direction of Prof. Lee W. Seward (33), psychophysicist extraordinary, one of the youngest pioneers in the field of hallucinogenic research.

Better for the world if he hadn't been, thought Seward wearily as he lowered his worn-out body into the chair and stared at the table full of notebooks and loose sheets of paper on which he'd been working ever since the result of Experiment Restoration.

Experiment Restoration. A fine name. Fine ideals to inspire it. Fine brains to make it. But something had gone wrong.

Originally developed to help in the work of curing mental disorders of all kinds, whether slight or extreme, the Hallucinomatics had been an extension on the old hallucinogenic drugs such as CO₂, Mescaline and Lysergic Acid derivatives. Their immediate ancestor was the stroboscope and machines like it. The stroboscope, spinning rapidly, flashing brightly coloured patterns into the eyes of a subject, often inducing epilepsy or a similar disorder; the research of Burroughs and his followers into the early types of crude hallucinomatics, had all helped to contribute to a better understanding of mental disorders.

But, as research continued, so did the incidence of mental illness rise rapidly throughout the world.

The Hampton Research Laboratory and others like it were formed to combat that rise with what had hitherto been considered near-useless experiments in the field of Hallucinomatics. Seward who had been stressing the potential importance of his chosen field since university, came into his own. He was made Director of the Hampton Lab.

People had earlier thought of Seward as a crank and of the hallucinomatics as being at best toys and at worse 'madness machines,' irresponsibly created by a madman.

But psychiatrists specially trained to work with them, had found them invaluable aids to their studies of mental disorders. It had become possible for a trained psychiatrist to induce in himself a temporary state of mental abnormality by use of these machines. Thus he was better able to understand and help his patients. By different methods—light, sound-waves, simulated brain-waves, and so on—the machines

created the symptoms of dozens of basic abnormalities and thousands of permutations. They became an essential part of modern psychiatry.

The result : hundreds and hundreds of patients, hitherto virtually incurable, had been cured completely.

But the birth-rate was rising even faster than had been predicted in the middle part of the century. And mental illness rose faster than the birth-rate. Hundreds of cases could be cured. But there were millions to be cured. There was no mass-treatment for mental illness.

Not yet.

Work at the Hampton Research Lab. became a frantic race to get ahead of the increase. Nobody slept much as, in the great big world outside, individual victims of mental illness turned into groups of—the world had only recently forgotten the old word and now remembered it again—*maniacs*.

An overcrowded, over-pressured world, living on its nerves, cracked up.

The majority of people, of course, did not succumb to total madness. But, those who did, became a terrible problem.

Governments, threatened by anarchy, were forced to re-institute the cruel, old laws in order to combat the threat. All over the world prisons, hospitals, mental homes, institutions of many kind, all were turned into Bedlams. This hardly solved the problem. Soon, if the rise continued, the sane would be in a minority.

A dark tide of madness, far worse even than that which had swept Europe in the Middle Ages, threatened to submerge civilisation.

Work at the Hampton Research Laboratory speeded up and speeded up—and members of the team began to crack. Not all these cases were noticeable to the over-worked men who remained sane. They were too busy with their frantic experiments.

Only Lee Seward and a small group of assistants kept going, making increasing use of stimulant-drugs and depressant-drugs to do so.

But, now that Seward thought back, they had not been sane, they had not remained cool and efficient any more than the others. They had seemed to, that was all. Perhaps the drugs had deceived them.

The fact was, they had panicked—though the signs of panic had been hidden, even to themselves, under the disciplined guise of sober thinking.

Their work on tranquilising machines had not kept up with their perfection of stimulatory devices. This was because they had had to study the reasons for mental abnormalities before they could begin to devise machines for curing them.

Soon, they decided, the whole world would be mad, well before they could perfect their tranquilomatic machines. They could see no way of speeding up this work any more.

Seward was the first to put it to his team. He remembered his words.

“Gentlemen, as you know, our work on hallucinomats for the actual *curing* of mental disorders is going too slowly. There is no sign of our perfecting such machines in the near future. I have an alternative proposal.”

The alternative proposal had been Experiment Restoration. The title, now Seward thought about it, had been euphemistic. It should have been called Experiment Diversion. The existing hallucinomats would be set up throughout the world and used to induce *passive* disorders in the minds of the greater part of the human race. The co-operation of national governments and World Council was sought and given. The machines were set up secretly at key points all over the globe.

They began to ‘send’ the depressive symptoms of various disorders. They worked. People became quiet and passive. A large number went into catatonic states. Others—a great many others, who were potentially inclined to melancholia manic-depression, certain kinds of schizophrenia—committed suicide. Rivers became clogged with corpses, roads awash with the blood and flesh of those who’d thrown themselves in front of cars. Every time a plane or rocket was seen in the sky, people expected to see at least one body come falling from it. Often, whole cargoes of people, were killed by the suicide of a captain, driver or pilot of a vehicle.

Even Seward had not suspected the extent of the potential suicides. He was shocked. So was his team.

So were the World Council and the national governments. They told Seward and his team to turn off their machines and reverse the damage they had done, as much as possible.

Seward had warned them of the possible result of doing this. He had been ignored. His machines had been confiscated and the World Council had put untrained or ill-trained operators on them. This was one of the last acts of the World Council. It was one of the last rational—however ill-judged—acts the world knew.

The real disaster had come about when the bungling operators that the World Council had chosen set the hallucinomats to send the full effects of the conditions they'd originally been designed to produce. The operators may have been fools—they were probably mad themselves to do what they did. Seward couldn't know. Most of them had been killed by bands of psychopathic murderers who killed their victims by the hundreds in weird and horrible rites which seemed to mirror those of pre-history—or those of the insane South American cultures before the Spaniards.

Chaos had come swiftly—the chaos that now existed.

Seward and his three remaining assistants had protected themselves the only way they could, by erecting the stroboscopic Towers on the roof of the laboratory building. This kept the mobs off. But it did not help their consciences. One by one Seward's assistants had committed suicide.

Only Seward, keeping himself alive on a series of ever-more-potent drugs, somehow retained his sanity. And, he thought ironically, this sanity was only comparative.

A hypodermic syringe lay on the table and beside it a small bottle marked M-A 19—Mescaline-Andrenol Nineteen—a drug hitherto only tested on animals, never on human beings. But all the other drugs he had used to keep himself going had either run out or now had poor effects. The M-A 19 was his last hope of being able to continue his work on the tranquilomats he needed to perfect and thus rectify his mistake in the only way he could.

As he reached for the bottle and the hypodermic, he thought coolly that, now he looked back, the whole world had been suffering from insanity well before he had even considered Experiment Restoration. The decision to make the experiment had been just another symptom of the world-disease. Something like it would have happened sooner or later, whether by natural or artificial means. It wasn't really his fault. He had been nothing much more than fate's tool.

But logic didn't help. In a way it *was* his fault. By now, with an efficient team, he might have been able to have constructed a few experimental tranquilomats, at least.

"Now I've got to do it alone," he thought as he pulled up his trouser leg and sought a vein he could use in his clammy, grey flesh. He had long since given up dabbing the area with anaesthetic. He found a blue vein, depressed the plunger of the needle and sat back in his chair to await results.

t w o

They came suddenly and were drastic.

His brain and body exploded in a torrent of mingled ecstasy and pain which surged through him. Waves of pale light flickered. Rich darkness followed. He rode a ferris-wheel of erupting sensations and emotions. He fell down a never-ending slope of obsidian rock surrounded by clouds of green, purple, yellow, black. The rock vanished, but he continued to fall.

Then there was the smell of disease and corruption in his nostrils, but even that passed and he was standing up.

World of phosphorescence drifting like golden spheres into black night. Green, blue, red explosions. Towers rotate slowly. Towers Advance. Towers Recede. Advance. Recede. Vanish.

Flickering world of phosphorescent tears falling into the timeless, spaceless wastes of Nowhere. World of Misery. World of Antagonism. World of Guilt. Guilt—guilt—guilt . . .

World of hateful wonder.

Heart throbbing, mind thudding, body shuddering as M-A 19 flowed up the infinity of the spine. Shot into back-brain, shot into mid-brain, shot into fore-brain.

EXPLOSION ALL CENTRES !

No-mind— No-body— No-where.

Dying waves of light danced out of his eyes and away through the dark world. Everything was dying. Cells, sinews, nerves, synapses—all crumbling. Tears of light, fading, fading.

Brilliant rockets streaking into the sky, exploding all together and sending their multicoloured globes of light—balls on a Xmas Tree—balls on a great tree—x-mass—drifting slowly earthwards.

Ahead of him was a tall, blocky building constructed of huge chunks of yellowed granite, like a fortress. Black mist swirled around it and across the bleak, horizonless nightscape.

This was no normal hallucinatory experience. Seward felt the ground under his feet, the warm air on his face, the half-familiar smells. He had no doubt that he had entered another world.

But where was it ? How had he got here ?

Who had brought him here ?

The answer might lie in the fortress ahead. He began to walk towards it. Gravity seemed lighter, for he walked with greater ease than normal and was soon standing looking up at the huge green metallic door. He bunched his fist and rapped on it.

Echoes boomed through numerous corridors and were absorbed in the heart of the fortress.

Seward waited as the door was slowly opened.

A man who so closely resembled the Laughing Cavalier of the painting that he must have modelled his beard and clothes on it, bowed slightly and said :

"Welcome home, Professor Seward. We've been expecting you."

The bizarrely dressed man stepped aside and allowed him to pass into a dark corridor.

"Expecting me," said Seward. "How?"

The Cavalier replied good-humouredly : "That's not for me to explain. Here we go—through this door and up this corridor." He opened the door and turned into another corridor and Seward followed him.

They opened innumerable doors and walked along innumerable corridors.

The complexities of the corridors seemed somehow familiar to Seward. He felt disturbed by them, but the possibility of an explanation overrode his qualms and he willingly followed the Laughing Cavalier deeper and deeper into the fortress, through the twists and turns until they arrived at a door which was probably very close to the centre of the fortress.

The Cavalier knocked confidently on the door, but spoke deferentially. "Professor Seward is here at last, sir."

A light, cultured voice said from the other side of the door : "Good. Send him in."

This door opened so slowly that it seemed to Seward that he was watching a film slowed-down to a fraction of its proper speed. When it had opened sufficiently to let him enter, he went into the room beyond. The Cavalier didn't follow him.

It only occurred to him then that he might be in some kind of mental institution, which would explain the fortress-like nature of the building and the man dressed up like the Laughing Cavalier. But, if so, how had he got here—unless he had collapsed and order had been restored sufficiently for someone to have come and collected him. No, the idea was weak.

The room he entered was full of rich, dark colours. Satin screens and hangings obscured much of it. The ceiling was not visible. Neither was the source of the rather dim light. In the centre of the room stood a dais, raised perhaps a foot from the floor. On the dais was an old leather armchair.

In the armchair sat a naked man with a cool, blue skin.

He stood up as Seward entered. He smiled charmingly and stepped off the dais, advancing towards Seward with his right hand extended.

"Good to see you, old boy!" he said heartily.

Dazed, Seward clasped the offered hand and felt his whole arm tingle as if it had had a mild electric shock. The man's strange flesh was firm, but seemed to itch under Seward's palm.

The man was short — little over five feet tall. His eyebrows met in the centre and his shiny black hair grew to a widow's peak.

Also, he had no navel.

"I'm glad you could get here, Seward," he said, walking back to his dais and sitting in the armchair. He rested his head in one hand, his elbow on the arm of the chair.

Seward did not like to appear ungracious, but he was worried and mystified. "I don't know where this place is," he said. "I don't even know how I got here—unless . . ."

"Ah, yes—the drug. M-A 19, isn't it? That helped, doubtless. We've been trying to get in touch with you for ages, old boy."

"I've got work to do—back there," Seward said obsessively. "I'm sorry, but I want to get back as soon as I can. What do you want?"

The Man Without A Navel sighed. "I'm sorry, too, Seward. But we can't let you go yet. There's something I'd like to ask you—a favour. That was why we were hoping you'd come."

"What's your problem?" Seward's sense of unreality, never very strong here for, in spite of the world's bizarre appearance, it seemed familiar, was growing weaker. If he could help the man and get back to continue his research, he would.

"Well," smiled the Man Without A Navel, "it's really your problem as much as ours. You see," he shrugged diffidently, "we want your world destroyed."

"What!" Now something was clear, at last. This man and his kind did belong to another world—whether in space, time, or different dimensions—and they were enemies of Earth. "You can't expect me to help you do that!" He laughed. "You *are* joking."

The Man Without A Navel shook his head seriously. "Afraid not, old boy."

"That's why you want me here—you've seen the chaos in the world and you want to take advantage of it—you want me to be a—a fifth columnist."

"Ah, you remember the old term, eh? Yes, I suppose that is what I mean. I want you to be our agent. Those machines of yours could be modified to make those who are left turn against each other even more than at present. Eh?"

"You must be very stupid if you think I'll do that," Seward said tiredly. "I can't help you. I'm trying to help *them*." Was he trapped here for good? He said weakly: "You've got to let me go back."

"Not as easy as that, old boy. I—and my friends—want to enter your world, but we can't until you've pumped up your machines to such a pitch that the entire world is maddened and destroys itself, d'you see?"

"Certainly," exclaimed Seward. "But I'm having no part of it!"

Again the Man Without A Navel smiled, slowly. "You'll weaken soon enough, old boy."

"Don't be so sure," Seward said defiantly. "I've had plenty of chances of giving up—back there. I could have weakened. But I didn't."

"Ah, but you've forgotten the new factor, Seward."

"What's that?"

"The M-A 19."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll know soon enough."

"Look—I want to get out of this place. You can't keep me—there's no point—I won't agree to your plan. Where is this world, anyway?"

"Knowing that depends on you, old boy," the man's tone was mocking. "Entirely on you. A lot depends on you, Seward."

"I know."

The Man Without A Navel lifted his head and called : " Brother Sebastian, are you available." He glanced back at Seward with an ironical smile. " Brother Sebastian may be of some help."

Seward saw the wall-hangings on the other side of the room move. Then, from behind a screen on which was painted a weird, surrealistic scene, a tall, cowed figure emerged, face in shadow, hands folded in sleeves. A monk.

" Yes, sir," said the monk in a cold, malicious voice.

" Brother Sebastian, Professor Seward here is not quite as ready to comply with our wishes as we had hoped. Can you influence him in any way?"

" Possibly, sir." Now the tone held a note of anticipation.

" Good. Professor Seward, will you go with Brother Sebastian?"

" No." Seward had thought the room contained only one door—the one he'd entered through. But now there was a chance of there being more doors—other than the one through which the cowed monk had come. The two men didn't seem to hear his negative reply. They remained where they were, not moving. " No," he said again, his voice rising. " What right have you to do this?"

" Rights? A strange question." The monk chuckled to himself. It was a sound like ice tumbling into a cold glass.

" Yes—rights. You must have some sort of organisation here. Therefore you must have a ruler—or government. I demand to be taken to someone in authority."

" But I am in authority here, old boy," purred the blue-skinned man. " And—in a sense—so are you. If you agreed with my suggestion, you could hold tremendous power. Tremendous."

" I don't want to discuss that again." Seward began to walk towards the wall-hangings. They merely watched him—the monk with his face in shadow—the Man Without A Navel with a supercilious smile on his thin lips. He walked around a screen, parted the hangings—and there they were on the other side. He went through the hangings. This was some carefully planned trick—an illusion—deliberately intended to confuse him. He was used to such methods, even though he didn't understand how they'd worked this one.

He said : " Clever—but tricks of this kind won't make me weaken."

"What on earth d'you mean, Seward, old man? Now, I wonder if you'll accompany Brother Sebastian here. I have an awful lot of work to catch up on."

"All right," Seward said. "All right, I will." Perhaps on the way to wherever the monk was going, he would find an opportunity to escape.

The monk turned and Seward followed him. He did not look at the Man Without A Navel as he passed his ridiculous dais, with its ridiculous leather armchair.

They passed through a narrow doorway behind a curtain and were once again in the complex series of passages. The tall monk—now he was close to him, Seward estimated his height at about six feet, seven inches—seemed to flow along in front of him. He began to dawdle. The monk didn't look back. Seward increased the distance between them. Still, the monk didn't appear to notice.

Seward turned and ran.

They had met nobody on their journey through the corridors. He hoped he could find a door leading out of the fortress before someone spotted him. There was no cry from behind him.

But as he ran, the passages got darker and darker until he was careering through pitch blackness, sweating, panting and beginning to panic. He kept blundering into damp walls and running on.

It was only much later that he began to realise he was running in a circle that was getting tighter and tighter until he was doing little more than spin round, like a top. He stopped, then.

These people evidently had more powers than he had suspected. Possibly they had some means of shifting the position of the corridor walls, following his movements by means of hidden TV cameras or something like them. Simply because there were no visible signs of an advanced technology didn't mean that they did not possess one. They obviously did. How else could they have got him from his own world to this?

He took a pace forward. Did he sense the walls drawing back? He wasn't sure. The whole thing reminded him vaguely of *The Pit and The Pendulum*.

He strode forward a number of paces and saw a light ahead of him. He walked towards it, turned into a dimly-lit corridor.

The monk was waiting for him.

"We missed each other, Professor Seward. I see you managed to precede me." The monk's face was still invisible, secret in its cowl. As secret as his cold mocking, malevolent voice. "We are almost there, now," said the monk.

Seward stepped towards him, hoping to see his face, but it was impossible. The monk glided past him. "Follow me, please."

For the moment, until he could work out how the fortress worked, Seward decided to accompany the monk.

They came to a heavy, iron-studded door—quite unlike any of the other doors.

They walked in to a low-ceilinged chamber. It was very hot. Smoke hung in the still air of the room. It poured from a glowing brazier at the extreme end. Two men stood by the brazier.

One of them was a thin man with a huge, bulging stomach over which his long, narrow hands were folded. He had a shaggy mane of dirty white hair, his cheeks were sunken and his nose extremely long and extremely pointed. He seemed toothless and his puckered lips were shaped in a senseless smile—like the smile of a madman Seward had once had to experiment on. He wore a stained white jacket buttoned over his grotesque paunch. On his legs were loose khaki trousers.

His companion was also thin, though lacking the stomach. He was taller and had the face of a mournful bloodhound, with sparse, highly-greased, black hair that covered his boney head like a skull-cap. He stared into the brazier, not looking up as Brother Sebastian led Seward into the room and closed the door.

The thin man with the stomach, however, pranced forward, his hands still clasped on his paunch, and bowed to them both.

"Work for us, Brother Sebastian?" he said, nodding at Seward.

"We require a straightforward 'Yes,'" Brother Sebastian said. "You have merely to ask the question 'Will You'? If he replies 'No,' you are to continue. If he replies 'Yes,' you are to cease and inform me immediately."

"Very well, Brother. Rely on us."

"I hope I can." The monk chuckled again. "You are now in the charge of these men, professor. If you decide you want to help us, after all, you have only to say 'Yes.' Is that clear?"

Seward began to tremble with horror. He had suddenly realised what this place was.

"Now look here," he said. "You can't . . ."

He walked towards the monk who had turned and was opening the door. He grasped the man's shoulder. His hand seemed to clutch a delicate, bird-like structure. "Hey! I don't think you're a man at all. What *are* you?"

"A man or a mouse," chuckled the monk as the two grotesque creatures leapt forward suddenly and twisted Seward's arms behind him. Seward kicked back at them with his heels, squirmed in their graps, but he might have been held by steel bands. He shouted incoherently at the monk as he shut the door behind him with a whisk of his habit.

The pair flung him on to the damp, hot stones of the floor. It smelt awful. He rolled over and sat up. They stood over him. The hound-faced man had his arms folded. The thin man with the stomach had his long hands on his paunch again. They seemed to rest there whenever he was not actually using them. It was the latter who smiled with his twisting, puckered lips, cocking his head to one side.

"What do *you* think, Mr. Morl?" he asked his companion.

"I don't know, Mr. Hand. After you." The hound-faced man spoke in a melancholy whisper.

"I would suggest Treatment H. Simple to operate, less work for us, a tried and trusty operation which works with most and will probably work with this gentleman."

Seward scrambled up and tried to push past them, making for the door. Again they seized him expertly and dragged him back. He felt the rough touch of rope on his wrists and the pain as a knot was tightened. He shouted, more in anger than agony, more in terror than either.

They were going to torture him. He knew it.

When they had tied his hands, they took the rope and tied his ankles. They twisted the rope up around his calves and under his legs. They made a halter of the rest and looped it over his neck so that he had to bend almost double if he was not to strangle.

Then they sat him on a chair.

Mr. Hand removed his hands from his paunch, reached up above Seward's head and turned on the tap.

The first drop of water fell directly on the centre of his head some five minutes later.

Twenty-seven drops of water later, Seward was raving and screaming. Yet every time he tried to jerk his head away, the halter threatened to strangle him and the jolly Mr. Hand and

the mournful Mr. Morl were there to straighten him up again.

Thirty drops of water after that, Seward's brain began to throb and he opened his eyes to see that the chamber had vanished.

In its place was a huge comet, a fireball dominating the sky, rushing directly towards him. He backed away from it and there were no more ropes on his hands or feet. He was free.

He began to run. He leapt into the air and stayed there. He was swimming through the air.

Ecstasy ran up his spine like a flickering fire, touched his back-brain, touched his mid-brain, touched his fore-brain.

EXPLOSION ALL CENTRES !

He was standing one flower among many, in a bed of tall lupins and roses which waved in a gentle wind. He pulled his roots free and began to walk.

He walked into the Lab Control Room .

Everything was normal except that gravity seemed a little heavy. Everything was as he'd left it.

He saw that he had left the Towers rotating. He went into the room he used as a bedroom and workroom. He parted the blind and looked out into the night. There was a big, full moon hanging in the deep, blue sky over the ruins of Hampton. He saw its light reflected in the far-away sea. A few bodies still lay prone near the lab. He went back into the Control Room and switched off the towers.

Returning to the bedroom he looked at the card-table he had his notes on. They were undisturbed. Neatly, side by side near a large, tattered notebook, lay a half-full ampule of M-A 19 and a hypodermic syringe. He picked up the ampule and threw it in a corner. It did not break but rolled around on the floor for a few seconds.

He sat down.

His whole body ached.

He picked up a sheaf of his more recent notes. He wrote everything down that came into his head on the subject of tranquilomats, it helped him think better and made sure that his drugged mind and body did not hamper him as much as they might have done if he had simply relied on his memory.

He looked at his wrists. They carried the marks of the rope. Evidently the transition from the other world to his own involved leaving anything in the other world behind. He was glad. If he hadn't, he'd have had a hell of a job getting himself

untied. He shuddered—a mob might have reached the lab before he could get free and activate the Towers.

He tried hard to forget the questions flooding through his mind. Where had he been? Who were the people? What did they really want? How far could they keep a check on him? How did the M-A 19 work to aid his transport into the other world? Could they get at him here?

He decided they couldn't get at him, otherwise they might have tried earlier. Somehow it was the M-A 19 in his brains which allowed them to get hold of him. Well, that was simple—no more M-A 19.

With a feeling of relief, he forced himself to concentrate on his notes.

Out of the confusion, something seemed to be developing, but he had to work at great speed—greater speed than previously, perhaps, for he daren't use the M-A 19 again and there was nothing else left of much good.

His brain cleared as he once again got interested in his notes. He worked for two hours, making fresh notes, equations, checking his knowledge against the stack of earlier research notes by the wall near his camp bed.

Dawn was coming as he realised suddenly that he was suffering from thirst. His throat was bone dry, so was his mouth and lips. He got up and his legs felt weak. He staggered, almost knocking over the chair. With a great effort he righted it and, leaning for support on the bed, got himself to the hand-basin. It was filled by a tank near the roof and he had used it sparsely. But this time he didn't care. He stuck his head under the tap and drank the stale water greedily. It did no good. His whole body now seemed cold, his skin tight, his heart thumping heavily against his ribs. His head was aching horribly and his breathing increased.

He went and lay down on the bed, hoping the feeling would leave him.

It got worse. He needed something to cure himself.

What? he asked.

M-A 19, he answered.

NO!

But— Yes, yes, yes. All he needed was a small shot of the drug and he would be all right. He knew it.

And with knowing that, he realised something else.

He was hooked.

The drug was habit-forming.

t h r e e

He found the half-full M-A 19 ampule under the bed where it had rolled. He found the needle on the table where he had left it, buried under his notes. He found a vein in his forearm and shot himself full. There was no thought to Seward's action. There was just the craving and the chance of satisfying that craving.

The M-A 19 began to swim leisurely through his veins, drifting up his spine—

It hit his brain with a powerful explosion.

He was walking through a world of phosphorescent rain, leaping over large purple rocks that welcomed his feet, drew them down towards them. All was agony and startling Now.

No-time, no-space, just the throbbing voice in the air above him. It was talking to him.

DOOM, Seward. DOOM, Seward. DOOM, Seward.

"Seward is doomed !" he laughed. "Seward is betrayed !"

Towers Advance. Towers Recede. Towers Rotate At Normal Speed.

Carnival Aktion. All Carnivals To Explode.

Up into the back-brain, into the mid-brain, on to the fore-brain.

EXPLOSION ALL CENTRES !

He was back in the torture-chamber, though standing up. In the corner near the brazier the grotesque pair were muttering to one another. Mr. Hand darted him an angry glance, his lips drawn over his gums in an expression of outrage.

"Hello, Seward," said the Man Without A Navel behind him. "So you're back."

"Back," said Seward heavily. "What more do you want?"

"Only your All, Seward, old man. I remember a time in Dartford before the War . . ."

"Which war?"

"Your war, Seward. You were too young to share any other. You don't remember *that* war. You weren't born. Leave it to those who *do*, Seward."

Seward turned. "My war?" He looked with disgust at the Man Without A Navel ; at his reptilian blue skin and his warm-cold, dark-light, good-evil eyes. At his small yet well-formed body.

The Man Without A Navel smiled. "Our war, then, old man. I won't quibble."

"You made me do it. I think that somehow you made me suggest Experiment Restoration !"

"I said we won't quibble, Seward," said the man in an authoritative tone. Then, more conversationally : "I remember a time in Dartford before the War, when you sat in your armchair—one rather like mine—at your brother-in-law's house. Remember what you said, old man ?"

Seward remembered well. "If," he quoted, "if I had a button and could press it and destroy the entire universe and myself with it, I would. For no reason other than boredom."

"Very good, Seward. You have an excellent memory."

"Is that all you're going on ? Something I said out of frustration because nobody was recognising my work ?" He paused as he realised something else. "You know all about me, don't you ?" he said bitterly. There seemed to be nothing he didn't know. On the other hand Seward knew of the man. Nothing of this world. Nothing of where it was in space and time. It was a word of insanity, of bizarre contrasts. "How do you know all this ?"

"Inside information, Seward, old boy."

"You're mad !"

The Man Without A Navel returned to his earlier topic. "Are you bored now, Seward ?"

"Bored ? No. Tired, yes."

"Bored, no—tired, yes. Very good, Seward. You got here later than expected. What kept you ?" The man laughed.

"I kept me. I held off taking the M-A 19 for as long as I could."

"But you came to us in the end, eh ? Good man, Seward."

"You knew the M-A 19 was habit-forming ? You knew I'd have to take it, come back here ?"

"Naturally."

He said pleadingly : "Let me go for God's sake ! You've made me. Made me . . ."

"Your dearest wish almost come true, Seward. Isn't that what you wanted ? I made you come close to destroying the world ? Is that it ?"

"So you *did* somehow influence Experiment Restoration !"

"It's possible. But you haven't done very well either way. The world is in shambles. You can't reverse that. Kill it off."

Let's start fresh, Seward. Forget your experiments with the tranquilomats and help us."

"No."

The Man Without A Navel shrugged. "We'll see, old boy."

He looked at the mumbling men in the corner. "Morl—Hand— take Professor Seward to his room. I don't want any mistakes this time. I'm going to take him out of your hands. Obviously we need subtler minds put on the problem."

The pair came forward and grabbed Seward. The Man Without A Navel opened the door and they went through it first, forcing Seward ahead of them.

He was too demoralised to resist much, this time. Demoralised by the fact that he was hooked on M-A 19. What did the junkies call it? The Habit. He had The Habit. Demoralised by his inability to understand the whereabouts or nature of the world he was on. Demoralised by the fact that the Man Without A Navel seemed to know everything about his personal life on Earth? Demoralised that he had fallen into the man's trap. Who had developed M-A 19? He couldn't remember. Perhaps the Man Without A Navel had planted it? He supposed it might be possible.

He was pushed along another series of corridors, arrived at another door. The Man Without A Navel came up behind them and unlocked the door.

Seward was shoved into the room. It was narrow and low—coffin-like.

"We'll be sending someone along to see you in a little while, Seward," said the man lightly. The door was slammed.

Seward lay in pitch blackness.

He began to sob.

Later, he heard a noise outside. A stealthy noise of creeping feet. He shuddered. What was the torture going to be this time?

He heard a scraping and a muffled rattle. The door opened.

Against the light from the passage, Seward saw the man clearly. He was a big, fat negro in a grey suit. He wore a flowing, rainbow-coloured tie. He was grinning.

Seward liked the man instinctively. But he no longer trusted his instinct. "What do you want?" he said suspiciously.

The huge negro raised his finger to his lips. "Sssshh," he whispered. "I'm going to try and get you out of here."

"An old Secret Police trick on my world," said Seward. "I'm not falling for that."

"It's no trick, son. Even if it is, what can you lose?"

"Nothing." Seward got up.

The big man put his arm around Seward's shoulders. Seward felt comfortable in the grip, though normally he disliked such gestures.

"Now, son, we go real quietly and we go as fast as we can. Come on."

Softly, the big man began to tiptoe along the corridor. Seward was sure that TV cameras, or whatever they were, were following him, that the Man Without A Navel, the monk, the two torturers, the Laughing Cavalier, were all waiting somewhere to seize him.

But, very quickly, the negro had reached a small wooden door and was drawing a bolt. He patted Seward's shoulder and held the door open for him. "Through you go son. Make for the red car."

It was morning. In the sky hung a golden sun, twice the size of Earth's. There was a vast expanse of lifeless rock in all directions, broken only by a white road which stretched into the distance. On the road, close to Seward, was parked a car something like a Cadillac. It was fire-red and bore the registration plates Y O U 000. Whoever these people were, Seward decided, they were originally from Earth—all except the Man Without A Navel, perhaps. Possibly this was his world and the others had been brought from Earth, like him.

He walked towards the car. The air was cold and fresh. He stood by the convertible and looked back. The negro was running over the rock towards him. He dashed round the car and got into the driver's seat. Seward got in beside him.

The negro started the car, put it into gear and shoved his foot down hard on the accelerator peddle. The car jerked away and had reached top speed in seconds.

At the wheel, the negro relaxed. "Glad that went smoothly. I didn't expect to get away with it so easily, son. You're Seward, aren't you?"

"Yes. You seem to be as well-informed as the others."

"I guess so." The negro took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "Smoke?"

"No thanks," said Seward. "That's one habit I don't have."

The negro looked back over his shoulder. The expanse of rock seemed never-ending, though in the distance the fortress was disappearing. He flipped a cigarette out of the pack and put it between his lips. He unclipped the car's lighter and put it to the tip of the cigarette. He inhaled and put the lighter back. The cigarette between his lips, he returned his other hand to the wheel.

He said: "They were going to send the Vampire to you. It's lucky I reached you in time."

"It could be," said Seward. "Who are you? What part do you play in this?"

"Let's just say I'm a friend of yours and an enemy of your enemies. The name's Farlowe."

"Well, I trust you, Farlowe—though God knows why."

Farlowe grinned. "Why not? I don't want your world destroyed any more than you do. It doesn't much matter, I guess, but if there's a chance of restoring it, then you ought to try."

"Then you're from my world originally, is that it?"

"In a manner of speaking, son," said Farlowe.

Very much later, the rock gave way to pleasant, flat countryside with trees, fields and little cottages peaceful under the vast sky. In the distance, Seward saw herds of cattle and sheep, the occasional horse. It reminded him of the countryside of his childhood, all clear and fresh and sharp with the clarity that only a child's eye can bring to a scene before it is obscured and tainted by the impressions of adulthood. Soon the flat country was behind them and they were going through an area of low, green hills, the huge sun flooding the scene with its soft, golden light. There were no clouds in the pale blue sky.

The big car sped smoothly along and Seward in the comfortable companionship of Farlowe, began to relax a little. He felt almost happy, would have felt happy if it had not been for the nagging knowledge that somehow he had to get back and continue his work. It was not merely a question of restoring sanity to the world, now—he had also to thwart whatever plans were in the mind of The Man Without A Navel.

After a long silence, Seward asked a direct question. "Farlowe, where is this world? What are we doing here?"

Farlowe's answer was vague. He stared ahead at the road. "Don't ask me that, son. I don't rightly know."

"But you live here."

"So do you."

"No—I only come here when—when . . ."

"When what?"

But Seward couldn't raise the courage to admit about the drug to Farlowe. Instead he said: "Does M-A 19 mean anything to you?"

"Nope."

So Farlowe hadn't come here because of the drug. Seward said: "But you said you were from my world originally."

"Only in a manner of speaking." Farlowe changed gears as the road curved steeply up a hill. It rose gently above the idyllic countryside below.

Seward changed his line of questioning. "Isn't there any sort of organisation here—no government. What's the name of this country?"

Farlowe shrugged. "It's just a place—no government. The people in the fortress run most things. Everybody's scared of them."

"I don't blame them. Who's the Vampire you mentioned?"

"He works for the Man."

"What is he?"

"Why—a vampire, naturally," said Farlowe in surprise.

The sun had started to set and the whole countryside was bathed in red-gold light. The car continued to climb the long hill.

Farlowe said: "I'm taking you to some friends. You ought to be fairly safe there. Then maybe we can work out a way of getting you back."

Seward felt better. At least Farlowe had given him some direct information.

As the car reached the top of the hill and began to descend Seward got a view of an odd and disturbing sight. The sun was like a flat, round, red disc—yet only half of it was above the horizon. *The line of the horizon evenly intersected the sun's disc!* It was some sort of mirage—yet so convincing that Seward looked away, staring instead at the black smoke which he could now see rolling across the valley below. He said nothing to Farlowe.

"How much further?" he asked later as the car came to the bottom of the hill. Black night had come, moonless, and the car's headlights blazed.

"A long way yet, I'm afraid, son," said Farlowe. "You cold?"

"No."

"We'll be hitting a few signs of civilisation soon. You tired?"

"No—why?"

"We could put up at a motel or something. I guess we could eat anyway."

Ahead, Seward saw a few lights. He couldn't make out where they came from. Farlowe began to slow down. "We'll risk it," he said. He pulled in towards the lights and Seward saw that it was a line of fuel pumps. Behind the pumps was a single-story building, very long and built entirely of timber by the look of it. Farlowe drove in between the pumps and the building. A man in overalls, the top half of his face shadowed by the peak of his cap, came into sight. Farlowe got out of the car with a signal to Seward to do the same. The negro handed his keys to the attendant. "Fill her full and give her a quick check."

Could this be Earth, Seward wondered. Earth in the future—or possible an Earth of a different space-time continuum. That was the likeliest explanation for this unlikely world. The contrast between recognisable, everyday things and the grotesqueries of the fortress was strange—yet it could be explained easily if these people had contact with his world. That would explain how they had things like cars and fuel stations and no apparent organisation necessary for producing them. Somehow, perhaps, they just—*stole* them?

He followed Farlowe into the long building. He could see through the wide windows that it was some kind of restaurant. There was a long, clean counter and a few people seated at tables at the far end. All had their backs to him.

He and Farlowe sat down on stools. Close to them was the largest pin-table Seward had ever seen. Its lights were flashing and its balls were clattering, though there was no one operating it. The coloured lights flashed series of numbers at him until his eyes lost focus and he had to turn away.

A woman was standing behind the counter now. Most of her face was covered by a yashmak.

"What do you want to eat, son?" said Farlowe, turning to him.

"Oh, anything."

Farlowe ordered sandwiches and coffee. When the woman had gone to get their order, Seward whispered : " Why's she wearing that thing ?"

Farlowe pointed at a sign Seward hadn't noticed before. It read THE HAREM HAVEN. "It's their gimmick," said Farlowe.

Seward looked back at the pin-table. The lights had stopped flashing, the balls had stopped clattering. But above it suddenly appeared a huge pair of disembodied eyes. He gasped.

Distantly, he heard his name being repeated over and over again. "Seward. Seward. Seward. Seward . . ."

He couldn't tell where the voice was coming from. He glanced up at the ceiling. Not from there. The voice stopped. He looked back at the pin-table. The eyes had vanished. His panic returned. He got off his stool.

" I'll wait for you in the car, Farlowe."

Farlowe looked surprised. " What's the matter, son ?"

" Nothing—it's okay—I'll wait in the car."

Farlowe shrugged.

Seward went out into the night. The attendant had gone but the car was waiting for him. He opened the door and climbed in.

What did the eyes mean ? Were the people from the fortress following him in some way. Suddenly an explanation for most of the questions bothering him sprang into his mind. Of course—telepathy. They were probably telepaths. That was how they knew so much about him. That could be how they knew of his world and could influence events there—they might never go there in person. This comforted him a little, though he realised that getting out of this situation was going to be even more difficult than he'd thought.

He looked through the windows and saw Farlowe's big body perched on its stool. The other people in the cafe were still sitting with their backs to him. He realised that there was something familiar about them.

He saw Farlowe get up and walk towards the door. He came out and got into the car, slamming the door after him. He leaned back in his seat and handed Seward a sandwich. " You seem worked up, son," he said. " You'd better eat this."

Seward took the sandwich. He was staring at the backs of the other customers again. He frowned.

Farlowe started the car and they moved towards the road. Then Seward realised who the men reminded him of. He craned his head back in the hope of seeing their faces, but it was too late. They had reminded him of his dead assistants—the men who'd committed suicide.

They roared through dimly-seen towns—all towers and angles. There seemed to be nobody about. Dawn came up and they still sped on. Seward realised that Farlowe must have a tremendous vitality, for he didn't seem to tire at all. Also, perhaps, he was motivated by a desire to get as far away from the fortress as possible.

They stopped twice to re-fuel and Farlowe bought more sandwiches and coffee which they had as they drove.

In the late afternoon Farlowe said : "Almost there."

They passed through a pleasant village. It was somehow alien, although very simple to a small English village. It had an oddly foreign look which was hard to place. Farlowe pulled in at what seemed to be the gates of a large public park. He looked up at the sun. "Just made it," he said. "Wait in the park—someone will come to collect you."

"You're leaving me?"

"Yes. I don't think they know where you are. They'll look but, with luck, they won't look around here. Out you get, son. Into the park."

"Who do I wait for?"

"You'll know her when she comes."

"Her?" He got out and closed the door. He stood on the pavement watching as, with a cheerful wave, Farlowe drove off. He felt a tremendous sense of loss then, as if his only hope had been taken away.

Gloomily, he turned and walked through the park gates.

four

As he walked between low hedges along a gravel path, he realised that this park, like so many things in this world, contrasted with the village it served. It was completely familiar just like a park on his own world.

It was like a grey, hazy winter's afternoon, with the brittle, interwoven skeletons of trees black and sharp against the cold sky. Birds perched on trees and bushes, or flew noisily into the silent air.

Evergreens crowded upon the leaf-strewn grass. Cry of sparrows. Peacocks, necks craned forward, dived towards scattered bread. Silver birch, larch, elm, monkey-puzzle trees, and swaying white ferns, each one like an ostrich feather stuck in the earth. A huge, ancient, nameless trunk from which, at the top, grew an expanse of soft, yellow fungus ; the trunk itself looking like a Gothic cliff, full of caves and dark windows. A grey and brown pigeon perched motionless on the slender branches of a young birch. Peacock chicks the size of hens pecked with concentration at the grass.

Mellow, nostalgic smell of winter ; distant sounds of children playing ; lost black dog looking for master ; red disc of sun in the cool, darkening sky. The light was sharp and yet soft, peaceful. A path led into the distance towards a flight of wide stone steps, at the top of which was the curving entrance to an arbour, browns, blacks and yellows of sapless branches and fading leaves.

From the arbour a girl appeared and began to descend the steps with quick, graceful movements. She stopped when she reached the path. She looked at him. She had long, blonde hair and wore a white dress with a full skirt. She was about seventeen.

The peace of the park was suddenly interrupted by children rushing from nowhere towards the peacocks, laughing and shouting. Some of the boys saw the tree trunk and made for it. Others stood looking upwards at the sun as it sank in the cold air. They seemed not to see either Seward or the girl. Seward looked at her. Did he recognise her ? It wasn't possible. Yet she, too, gave him a look of recognition, smiled shyly at him and ran towards him. She reached him, stood on tiptoe and gave him a light kiss on the cheek.

"Hello, Lee."

"Hello. Have you come to find me ?"

"I've been looking for you a long time."

"Farlowe sent a message ahead ?"

She took his hand. "Come on. Where have you been, Lee ?"

This was a question he couldn't answer. He let her lead him back up the steps, through the arbour. Between the branches he glanced a garden and a pool. "Come on," she said. "Let's see what's for dinner. Mother's looking forward to meeting you."

He no longer questioned how these strange people all seemed to know his name. It was still possible that all of them were taking part in the conspiracy against him.

At the end of the harbour was a house, several stories high. It was a pleasant house with a blue and white door. She led him up the path and into a hallway. It was shining with dark polished wood and brass plates on the walls. From a room at the end he smelled spicy cooking. She went first and opened the door at the end. "Mother—Lee Seward's here. Can we come in?"

"Of course." The voice was warm, husky, full of humour. They went into the room and Seward saw a woman of about forty, very well-preserved, tall, large-boned with a fine-featured face and smiling mouth. Her eyes also smiled. Her sleeves were rolled up and she put the lid back on a pan on the stove.

"How do you do, Professor Seward. Mr. Farlowe's told us about you. You're in trouble, I hear."

"How do you do, Mrs.—"

"Call me Martha. Has Sally introduced herself?"

"No," Sally laughed. "I forgot. I'm Sally, Lee."

Her mother gave a mock frown. "I suppose you've been calling our guest by his first name, as usual. Do you mind, professor?"

"Not at all." He was thinking how attractive they both were, in their different ways. The young, fresh girl and her warm, intelligent mother. He had always enjoyed the company of women, but never so much, he realised, as now. They seemed to complement one another. In their presence he felt safe, at ease. Now he realised why Farlowe had chosen them to hide him. Whatever the facts, he would *feel* safe here.

Martha was saying: "Dinner won't be long."

"It smells good."

"Probably smells better than it tastes," she laughed. "Go into the lounge with Sally. Sally, fix Professor Seward a drink."

"Call me Lee," said Seward, a little uncomfortably. He had never cared much for his first name. He preferred his middle name, William, but not many others did.

"Come on, Lee," she took his hand and led him out of the kitchen. "We'll see what there is." They went into a small, well-lighted lounge. The furniture, like the whole house, had a look that was half-familiar, half-alien—obviously the product

of a slightly different race. Perhaps they deliberately imitated Earth culture, without quite succeeding. Sally still gripped his hand. Her hand was warm and her skin smooth. He made to drop it but, involuntarily, squeezed it gently before she took it away to deal with the drink. She gave him another shy smile. He felt that she was as attracted to him as he to her. "What's it going to be?" she asked him.

"Oh, anything," he said, sitting down on a comfortable sofa. She poured him a dry martini and brought it over. Then she sat demurely down beside him and watched him drink it. Her eyes sparkled with a mixture of sauciness and innocence which he found extremely appealing. He looked around the room.

"How did Farlowe get his message to you?" he said.

"He came the other day. Said he was going to try and get into the fortress and help you. Farlowe's always flitting about. I think the people at the fortress have a price on his head or something. It's exciting isn't it."

"You can say that again," Seward said feelingly.

"Why are they after you?"

"They want me to help them destroy the world I come from. Do you know anything about it?"

"Earth, isn't it?"

"Yes." Was he going to get some straightforward answers at last?

"I know it's very closely connected with ours and that some of us want to escape from here and go to your world."

"Why?" he asked eagerly.

She shook her head. Her long, fine hair waved with the motion. "I don't really know. Something about their being trapped here—something like that. Farlowe said something about you being a 'key' to their release. They can only do what they want to do with your agreement."

"But I could agree and then break my word!"

"I don't think you could—but honestly, I don't know any more. I've probably got it wrong. Do you like me, Lee?"

He was startled by the directness of her question. "Yes," he said, "very much."

"Farlowe said you would. Good, isn't it?"

"Why—yes. Farlowe knows a lot."

"That's why he works against *them*."

Martha came in. "Almost ready," she smiled. "I think I'll have a quick one before I start serving. How are you feeling Lee, after your ride?"

"Fine," he said, "fine." He had never been in a position like this one—with two women either of whom was extremely attractive for almost opposite reasons.

"We were discussing why the people at the fortress wanted my help," he said, turning the conversation back the way he felt it ought to go if he was ever going to get off this world and back to his own and his work.

"Farlowe said something about it."

"Yes, Sally told me. Does Farlowe belong to some sort of underground organisation?"

"Underground? Why, yes, in a way he does."

"Aren't they strong enough to fight the Man Without A Navel and his friends?"

"Farlowe says they're strong enough, but divided over what should be done and how."

"I see. That's fairly common amongst such groups, I believe."

"Yes."

"What part do you play?"

"None, really. Farlowe asked me to put you up—that's all." She sipped her drink, her eyes smiling directly into his. He drained his glass.

"Shall we eat?" she said. "Sally, take Lee in to the dining room."

The girl got up and, somewhat possessively Seward thought, linked her arm in his. Her young body against his was distracting. He felt a little warm. She took him in. The table was laid for supper. Three chairs and three places. The sun had set and candles burned on the table in brass candelabras. She unlinked her arm and pulled out one of the chairs.

"You sit here, Lee—at the head of the table." She grinned. Then she leaned forward as he sat down. "Hope mummy isn't boring you."

He was surprised. "Why should she?"

Martha came in with three covered dishes on a tray. "This may not have turned out quite right, Lee. Never does when you're trying hard."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," he smiled. The two women sat down one either side of him. Martha served him. It was some sort of goulash with vegetables. He took his napkin and put it on his lap.

As they began to eat, Martha said : " How is it ?"

" Fine," he said. It was very good. Apart from the feeling that some kind of rivalry for his attentions existed between mother and daughter the air of normality in the house was comforting. Here, he might be able to do some constructive thinking about his predicament.

When the meal was over, Martha said : " It's time for bed, Sally. Say good night to Lee."

She pouted. " Oh, it's not fair."

" Yes it is," she said firmly. " You can see Lee in the morning. He's had a long journey."

" All right." She smiled at Seward. " Sleep well, Lee."

" I think I will," he said.

Martha chuckled after Sally had gone. " Would you like a drink before you go to bed ?" She spoke softly.

" Love one," he said.

They went into the other room. He sat down on the sofa as she mixed the drinks. She brought them over and sat down next to him as her daughter had done earlier.

" Tell me everything that's been happening. It sounds so exciting."

He knew at once he could tell her all he wanted to, that she would listen and be sympathetic. " It's terrifying, really," he began, half-apologetically. He began to talk, beginning with what had happened on Earth. She listened.

" I even wondered if this was a dream-world—a figment of my imagination," he finished, " but I had to reject that when I went back to my own. I had rope marks on my wrists—my hair was soaking wet. You don't get that in a dream !"

" I hope not," she smiled. " We're different here, Lee, obviously. Our life doesn't have the—the *shape* that yours has. We haven't much direction, no real desires. We just—well—*exist*. It's as if we're waiting for something to happen. As if—" she paused and seemed to be looking down deep into herself. " Put it this way—Farlowe thinks you're the key figure in some development that's happening here. Supposing—supposing we were some kind of—of experiment . . ."

" Experiment ? How do you mean ?"

" Well, from what you say, the people at the fortress have an advanced science that we don't know about. Supposing our parents, say, had been kidnapped from your world and—made to think—that's the word—"

"Conditioned?"

"Yes, conditioned to think they were natives of this world. We'd have grown up knowing nothing different. Maybe the Man Without A Navel is a member of an alien race—a scientist of some kind in charge of the experiment."

"But why should they make such a complicated experiment?"

"So they could study us, I suppose."

Seward marvelled at her deductive powers. She had come to a much firmer theory than he had. But then, he thought, she might subconsciously *know* the truth. Everyone knew much more than they knew, as it were. For instance, it was pretty certain that the secret of the tranquilomat was locked somewhere down in his unconscious if only he could get at it. Her explanation was logical and worth thinking about.

"You may be right," he said. "If so, it's something to go on. But it doesn't stop my reliance on the drug—or the fact that the Man and his helpers are probably telepathic and are at this moment looking for me."

She nodded. "Could there be an *antidote* for the drug?"

"Unlikely. Drugs like that don't really need antidotes—they're not like poisons. There must be some way of getting at the people in the fortress — some way of putting a stop to their plans. What about an organised revolution? What has Farlowe tried to do?"

"Nothing much. The people aren't easy to organise. We haven't much to do with one another. Farlowe was probably hoping you could help—think of something he hasn't. Maybe one of those machines you mentioned would work against the fortress people?"

"No, I don't think so. Anyway, the hallucinomats are too big to move from one place to another by hand—let alone from one world to another."

"And you haven't been able to build a tranquilomat yet?"

"No—we have a lot of experimental machines lying around at the lab—they're fairly small—but it's a question of modifying them—that's what I'm trying to do at the moment. If I could make one that works it would solve part of my problem—it would save my world and perhaps even save yours, if you *are* in a state of conditioning."

"It sounds reasonable," she dropped her eyes and looked at her drink. She held the glass balanced on her knees which

were pressed closely together, nearly touching him. "But," she said, "they're going to catch you sooner or later. They're very powerful. They're sure to catch you. Then they'll make you agree to their idea."

"Why are you so certain?"

"I know them."

He let that go. She said: "Another drink?" and got up.

"Yes please." He got up, too, and extended his glass, then went closer to her. She put bottle and glass on the table and looked into his face. There was compassion, mystery, tenderness in her large, dark eyes. He smelled her perfume warm, pleasant. He put his arms around her and kissed her. "My room," she said. They went upstairs.

Later that night, feeling strangely revitalised, he left the bed and the sleeping Martha and went and stood beside the window overlooking the silent park. He felt cold and he picked up his shirt and trousers, put them on. He sighed. He felt his mind clear and his body relax. He must work out a way of travelling from this world to his own at will—that might put a stop to the plans of the Man Without A Navel.

He turned guiltily as he heard the door open. Sally was standing there. She wore a long, white, flowing nightdress.

"Lee! I came to tell mummy—what are you doing in here?" Her eyes were horrified, accusing him. Martha sat up suddenly.

"Sally—what's the matter!"

Lee stepped forward. "Listen, Sally. Don't—"

Sally shrugged, but tears had come to her eyes. "I thought you wanted *me*! Now I know—I shouldn't have brought you here. Farlowe said—"

"What did Farlowe say?"

"He said you'd want to marry me!"

"But that's ridiculous. How could he say that? I'm a stranger here. You were to hide me from the fortress people, that's all."

But she had only picked up one word. "Ridiculous. Yes, I suppose it is, when my own mother . . ."

"Sally—you'd better go to bed. We'll discuss it in the morning," said Martha softly. "What was it you came in about?"

Sally laughed theatrically. "It doesn't matter now." She slammed the door.

Seward looked at Martha. "I'm sorry, Martha."

"It wasn't your fault—or mine. Sally's romantic and young."

"And jealous," Seward sat down on the bed. The feeling of comfort, of companionship, of bringing some order out of chaos—it had all faded. "Look, Martha, I can't stay here."

"You're running away?"

"If you like—but—well—the two of you—I'm in the middle."

"I guessed that. No you'd better stay. We'll work something out."

"Okay." He got up, sighing heavily. "I think I'll go for a walk in the park—it may help me to think. I'd just reached the stage where I was getting somewhere. Thanks for that, anyway, Martha."

She smiled. "Don't worry, Lee. I'll have everything running smoothly again by tomorrow."

He didn't doubt it. She was a remarkable woman.

He put on his socks and shoes, opened the door and went out on to the landing. Moonlight entered through a tall, slender window at the end. He went down the two flights of stairs and out of the front door. He turned into the lane and entered the arbour. In the cool of the night, he once again was able to begin some constructive thinking.

While he was on this world, he would not waste his time, he would keep trying to discover the necessary modifications to make the tranquilomats workable.

He wandered through the arbour, keeping any thoughts of the two women out of his mind. He turned into another section of the arbour he hadn't noticed before. The turnings became numerous but he was scarcely aware of them. It was probably some sort of child's maze.

He paused as he came to a bench. He sat down and folded his arms in front of him, concentrating on his problem.

Much later he heard a sound to his right and looked up.

A man he didn't know was standing there, grinning at him.

Seward noticed at once that the man had overlong canines, that he smelt of damp earth and decay. He wore a black, polo-neck pullover and black, stained trousers. His face was waxen and very pale.

"I've been looking for you for ages, Professor Seward," said the Vampire.

five

Seward got up and faced the horrible creature. The Vampire continued to smile. He didn't move. Seward felt revulsion.

"It's been a long journey," said the Vampire in a sibillant voice like the sound of a frigid wind blowing through dead boughs. "I had intended to visit you at the fortress, but when I got to your room you had left. I was disappointed."

"Doubtless," said Seward. "Well, you've had a wasted journey. I'm not going back there until I'm ready."

"That doesn't interest me."

"What does?" Seward tried to stop himself from trembling.

The Vampire put his hands into his pockets. "Only you."

"Get away from here. You're outnumbered—I have friends?" But he knew that his tone was completely unconvincing.

The Vampire hissed his amusement. "They can't do much, Seward."

"What are you—some sort of android made to frighten people?"

"No." The Vampire took a pace forward.

Suddenly he stopped as a voice came faintly from somewhere in the maze.

"Lee! Lee! Where are you?"

It was Sally's voice.

"Stay away, Sally!" Lee called.

"But I was going to warn you. I saw the Vampire from the window. He's somewhere in the park."

"I know. Go home!"

"I'm sorry about the scene, Lee. I wanted to apologise. It was childish."

"It doesn't matter." He looked at the Vampire. He was standing in a relaxed position, hands in pockets, smiling.

"Go home, Sally!"

"She won't, you know," whispered the Vampire.

Her voice was closer. "Lee, I must talk to you."

He screamed: "Sally—the Vampire's here. Go home. Warn your mother, not me. Get some help if you can—but go home!"

Now he saw her enter the part of the maze he was in. She gasped as she saw them. He was between her and the Vampire.

"Sally—do what I told you."

But the Vampire's cold eyes widened and he took one hand out of his pocket and crooked a finger. "Come here, Sally."

She began to walk forward.

He turned to the Vampire. "What do you want?"

"Only a little blood—yours, perhaps—or the young lady's."

"Damn you. Get away. Go back, Sally." She didn't seem to hear him.

He daredn't touch the cold body, the earth-damp clothes. He stepped directly between the girl and the Vampire.

He felt sick, but he reached out his hands and shoved at the creature's body. Flesh yielded, but bone did not. The Vampire held his ground, smiling, staring beyond Seward at the girl.

Seward shoved again and suddenly the creature's arms clamped around him and the grinning, fanged face darted towards his. The thing's breath disgusted him. He struggled, but could not break the Vampire's grasp.

A cold mouth touched his neck. He yelled and kicked. He felt a tiny pricking against his throat. Sally screamed. He heard her turn and run and felt a fraction of relief.

He punched with both fists as hard as he could into the creatures' solar plexus. It worked. The Vampire groaned and let go. Seward was disgusted to see that its fangs dripped with blood.

His blood.

Now rage helped him. He chopped at the Vampire's throat. It gasped, tottered, and fell in a sprawl of loose limbs to the ground.

Panting, Seward kicked it in the head. It didn't move.

He bent down and rolled the Vampire over. As far as he could tell it was dead. He tried to remember what he'd read about legendary vampires. Not much. Something about a stake through its heart. Well, that was out.

But the thought that struck him most was that he had fought one of the fortress people—and had won. It was possible to beat them!

He walked purposefully through the maze. It wasn't as tortuous as he'd supposed. Soon he emerged at the harbour entrance near the house. He saw Sally and Martha running towards him. Behind them, another figure lumbered. Farlowe. He had got here fast.

"Seward," he shouted. "They said the Vampire had got you!"

"I got him," said Seward as they came up and stopped.

"What?"

"I beat him."

"But—that's impossible."

Seward shrugged. He felt elated. "Evidently, it's possible," he said. "I knocked him out. He seems to be dead—but I suppose you never know with vampires."

Farlowe was astonished. "I believe you," he said, "but it's fantastic. How did you do it?"

"I got frightened and then angry," said Seward simply. "Maybe you've been over-awed by these people too long."

"It seems like it," Farlowe admitted. "Let's go and have a look at him. Sally and Martha had better stay behind."

Seward led him back through the maze. The Vampire was still where he'd fallen. Farlowe touched the corpse with his foot.

"That's the Vampire all right." He grinned. "I knew we had a winner in you, son. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going straight back to the fortress and get this worked out once and for all. Martha gave me an idea yesterday evening and she may well be right. I'm going to try and find out anyway."

"Better not be over-confident, son."

"Better than being over-cautious."

"Maybe," Farlowe agreed doubtfully. "What's this idea Martha gave you?"

"It's really her idea, complete. Let her explain. She's an intelligent woman—and she's bothered to think about this problem from scratch. I'd advise you to do the same."

"I'll hear what it is, first. Let's deal with the Vampire and then get back to the house."

"I'll leave the Vampire to you. I want to use your car."

"Why?"

"To go back to the fortress."

"Don't be a fool. Wait until we've got some help."

"I can't wait that long, Farlowe. I've got other work to do back on my own world."

"Okay," Farlowe shrugged.

Farlowe faded.

The maze began to fade.

Explosions in the brain.

Vertigo.

Sickness.

His head ached and he could not breathe. He yelled, but he had no voice. Multicoloured explosions in front of his eyes. He was whirling round and round, spinning rapidly. Then he felt a new surface dragging at his feet. He closed his eyes and stumbled against something. He fell on to something soft.

It was his camp bed. He was back in his laboratory.

Seward wasted no time wondering what had happened. He knew more or less. Possibly his encounter with the Vampire had sent him back—the exertion or—of course—the creature had drawn some of his blood. Maybe that was it. He felt the pricking sensation, still. He went to the mirror near the wash-stand. He could just see the little marks in his neck. Further proof that wherever that world was it was as real as the one he was in now.

He went to the table and picked up his notes, then walked into the other room. In one section was a long bench. On it, in various stages of dismantling, were the machines that he had been working on, the tranquilomats that somehow just didn't work. He picked up one of the smallest and checked its batteries, its lenses and its sonic agitator. The idea with this one was to use a combination of light and sound to agitate certain dormant cells in the brain. Long since, psychophysicists had realised that mental abnormality had a chemical as well as a mental cause. Just as a patient with a psychosomatic illness produced all the biological symptoms of whatever disease he thought he had, so did chemistry play a part in brain disorders. Whether the change in the brain cells came first or afterwards they weren't sure. But the fact was that the cells could be agitated and the mind, by a mixture of hypnosis and conditioning, could be made to work normally. But it was a long step from knowing this and being able to use the information in the construction of tranquilomats.

Seward began to work on the machine. He felt he was on the right track, at least.

But how long could he keep going before his need for the drug destroyed his will?

He kept going some five hours before his withdrawal symptoms got the better of him.

He staggered towards one of the drug-drawers and fumbled out an ampule of M-A 19. He staggered into his bedroom and reached for the needle on the table.

He filled the syringe. He filled his veins. He filled his brains with a series of explosions which blew him clean out of his own world into the other.

Fire flew up his spine. Ignited back-brain, ignited mid-brain, ignited fore-brain. Ignited all centres.

EXPLOSION ALL CENTRES.

This time the transition was brief. He was standing in the part of the maze where he'd been when he'd left. The Vampire's corpse was gone. Farlowe had gone, also. He experienced a feeling of acute frustration that he couldn't continue with his work on KLTM-8—the tranquilomat he'd been modifying when his craving for the M-A 19 took over.

But there was something to do here, too.

He left the maze and walked towards the house. It was dawn and very cold. Farlowe's car was parked there. He noticed the license number. It seemed different. It now said YOU 009. Maybe he'd mistaken the last digit for a zero last time he'd looked.

The door was ajar. Farlowe and Martha were standing in the hall.

They looked surprised when he walked in.

"I thought the Vampire was peculiar, son," said Farlowe.

"But yours was the best vanishing act I've ever seen."

"Martha will explain that, too," Seward said, not looking at her. "Has she told you her theory?"

"Yes, it sounds feasible." He spoke slowly, looking at the floor. He looked up. "We got rid of the Vampire. Burned him up. He burns well."

"That's one out of the way, at least," said Seward. "How many others are there at the fortress?"

Farlowe shook his head. "Not sure. How many did you see?"

"The Man Without A Navel, a character called Brother Sebastian who wears a cowl and probably isn't human either, two pleasant gentlemen called Mr. Morl and Mr. Hand—and a man in fancy dress whose name I don't know."

"There are one or two more," Farlowe said. "But it's not their numbers we've got to worry about—it's their power!"

"I think maybe it's over-rated," Seward said.

"You may be right, son."

"I'm going to find out."

"You still want my car?"

"Yes. If you want to follow up behind with whatever help you can gather, do that."

"I will." Farlowe glanced at Martha. "What do you think, Martha?"

"I think he may succeed," she said. "Good luck, Lee." She smiled at him in a way that made him want to stay.

"Right," said Seward. "I'm going. Hope to see you there."

"I may be wrong, Lee," she said warningly. "It was only an idea."

"It's the best one I've heard. Goodbye."

He went out of the house and climbed into the car.

s i x

The road was white, the sky was blue, the car was red and the countryside was green. Yet there was less clarity about the scenery than Seward remembered. Perhaps it was because he no longer had the relaxing company of Farlowe, because his mind was working furiously and his emotions at full blast.

Whoever had designed the set-up on this world had done it well, but had missed certain details. Seward realised that one of the 'alien' aspects of the world was that everything was just a little too new. Even Farlowe's car looked as if it had just been driven off the production line.

By the early afternoon he was beginning to feel tired and some of his original impetus had flagged. He decided to move in to the side of the road and rest for a short time, stretch his legs. He stopped the car and got out.

He walked over to the other side of the road. It was on a hillside and he could look down over a wide, shallow valley. A river gleamed in the distance, there were cottages and livestock in the fields. He couldn't see the horizon. Far away he saw a great bank of reddish-looking clouds that seemed to swirl and seethe like a restless ocean. For all the *signs* of habitation, the countryside had taken on a desolate quality as if it had been abandoned. He could not believe that there were people living in the cottages and tending the livestock. The whole thing looked like the set for a film. Or a play—a complicated play devised by the Man Without A Navel and his friends—a play in which the fate of a world—possibly two worlds—was at stake.

How soon would the play resolve itself? he wondered, as he turned back towards the car.

A woman was standing by the car. She must have come down the hill while he was looking at the valley. She had long, jet black hair and big, dark eyes. Her skin was tanned dark gold. She had full, extraordinarily sensuous lips. She wore a well-tailored red suit, a black blouse, black shoes and black handbag. She looked rather sheepish. She raised her head to look at him and as she did so a lock of her black hair fell over her eyes. She brushed it back.

"Hello," she said. "Am I lucky?"

"Are you?"

"I hope so. I didn't expect to find a car on the road. You haven't broken down have you?" She asked this last question anxiously.

"No," he said. "I stopped for a rest. How did you get here?"

She pointed up the hill. "There's a little track up there—a cattle-track, I suppose. My car skidded and went into a tree. It's a wreck."

"I'll have a look at it for you."

She shook her head. "There's no point—it's a write-off. Can you give me a lift?"

"Where are you going?" he said unwillingly.

"Well, it's about sixty miles that way," she pointed in the direction he was going. "A small town."

It wouldn't take long to drive sixty miles on a road as clear as this with no apparent speed-limit. He scratched his head doubtfully. The woman was a diversion he hadn't expected and, in a way, resented. But she was very attractive. He couldn't refuse her. He hadn't seen any cart-tracks leading off the road. This, as far as he knew, was the only one, but it was possible he hadn't noticed since he didn't know this world. Also, he decided, the woman evidently wasn't involved in the struggle between the fortress people and Farlowe's friends. She was probably just one of the conditioned, living out her life completely unaware of where she was and why. He might be able to get some information out of her.

"Get in," he said.

"Oh, thanks." She got in, seeming rather deliberately to show him a lot of leg. He opened his door and slid under the wheel. She sat uncomfortably close to him. He started the engine and moved the car out on to the road again.

"I'm a stranger here," he began conversationally. "What about you?"

"Not me—I've lived hereabouts all my life. Where do you come from—stranger?"

He smiled. "A long way away."

"Are they all as good looking as you?" It was trite, but it worked. He felt flattered.

"Not any more," he said. That was true. Maniacs never looked very good. But this wasn't the way he wanted the conversation to go, however nice the direction. He said: "You're not very heavily populated around here. I haven't seen another car, or another person for that matter, since I set off this morning."

"It does get boring," she said. She smiled at him. That and her full body, her musky scent and her closeness, made him breathe more heavily than he would have liked. One thing about this world—the women were considerably less inhibited than on his own. It was a difference in population, perhaps. In an overcrowded world your social behaviour must be more rigid, out of necessity.

He kept his hands firmly on the wheel and his eyes on the road, convinced that if he didn't he'd lose control of himself and the car. The result might be a sort of femme fatality. His attraction towards Sally and Martha had not been wholly sexual. Yet he had never felt such purely animal attraction that this woman radiated. Maybe, he decided, she didn't know it. He glanced at her. There again, maybe she did.

It said a lot for the woman if she could take his mind so completely off his various problems.

"My name's Magdalen," she smiled. "A bit of a mouth-full. What's yours?"

It was a relief to find someone here who didn't already know his name. He rejected the unliked Lee and said: "Bill—Bill Ward."

"Short and sweet," she said. "Not like mine."

He grunted vaguely, consciously fighting the emotions rising in him. There was a word for them. A simple word—short and sweet—lust. He rather liked it. He'd been somewhat repressed on his home world and had kept a tight censorship on his feelings. Here it was obviously different.

A little later, he gave in. He stopped the car and kissed her. He was surprised at the ease with which he did it. He forgot

about the tranquilomats, about the M-A 19, about the fortress. He forgot about everything except her, and that was maybe why he did what he did.

It was as if he was drawn into yet another world—a private world where only he and she had any existence. An enclosed world consisting only of their desire and their need to satisfy it.

Afterwards he felt gloomy, regretful and guilty. He started the car savagely. He knew he shouldn't blame her, but he was. He'd wasted time. Minutes were valuable, even seconds. He'd wasted hours.

Beside him she took a headscarf from her bag and tied it over her hair. "You're in a hurry"

He pressed the accelerator as far down as he could.

"What's the problem?" she shouted as the engine thudded noisily.

"I've wasted too much time already. I'll drop you off wherever it is you want."

"Oh, fine. Just one of those things, eh?"

"I suppose so. It was my fault, I shouldn't have picked you up in the first place."

She laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. It was a mocking laugh and it seemed to punch him in the stomach.

"Okay," he said, "okay."

He switched on the headlamps as dusk became night. There was no milometre on the dashboard so he didn't know how far they'd travelled, but he was sure it was more than sixty miles.

"Where is this town?" he said.

"Not much further." Her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Lee. But what *is* the matter?"

Something was wrong. He couldn't place it. He put it down to his own anger.

"You may not know it," he said, "but I suspect that nearly all the people living here are being deceived. Do you know the fortress?"

"You mean that big building on the rock wastes?"

"That's it. Well, there's a group of people there who are duping you and the rest in some way. They want to destroy practically the whole of the human race by a particularly nasty method—and they want me to do it for them."

"What's that?"

Briefly, he explained.

Again she laughed. "By the sound of it, you're a fool to fight this Man Without A Navel and his friends. You ought to throw in your lot with them. You could be top man."

"Aren't you angry?" he said in surprise. "Don't you believe me?"

"Certainly. I just don't share your attitude. I don't understand you turning down a chance when it's offered. I'd take it. As I said, you could be top man."

"I've already been top man," he said, "in a manner of speaking. On my own world. I don't want that kind of responsibility. All I want to do is save something from the mess I've made of civilisation."

"You're a fool, Lee."

That was it. She shouldn't have known him as Lee but as Bill, the name he'd introduced himself by. He stopped the car suddenly and looked at her suspiciously. The truth was dawning on him and it made him feel sick at himself that he could have fallen for her trap.

"You're working for him, aren't you. The Man?"

"You seem to be exhibiting all the symptoms of persecution mania, Seward. You need a good psychiatrist." She spoke coolly and reached into her handbag. "I don't feel safe with you."

"It's mutual," he said. "Get out of the car."

"No," she said quietly. "I think we'll go all the way to the fortress together." She put both hands into her bag. They came out with two things. One was a half bottle of brandy.

The other was a gun.

"Evidently my delay tactics weren't effective enough," she mocked. "I thought they might not be, so I brought these. Get out, yourself, Seward."

"You're going to kill me?"

"Maybe."

"But that isn't what The Man wants, is it?"

She shrugged, waving the gun.

Trembling with anger at his own gullibility and impotence, he got out. He couldn't think clearly.

She got out, too, keeping him covered. "You're a clever man, Seward. You've worked out a lot."

"There are others here who know what I know."

"What do they know?"

"They know about the set-up—about the conditioning."

She came round the car towards him, shaking her head. Still keeping him covered, she put the brandy bottle down on the seat.

He went for the gun.

He acted instinctively, in the knowledge that this was his only chance. He heard the gun go off, but he was forcing her wrist back. He slammed it down on the side of the car. She yelled and dropped it. Then he did what he had never thought he could do. He hit her, a short, sharp jab under the chin. She crumpled.

He stood over her, trembling. Then he took her headscarf and tied her limp hands behind her. He dragged her up and dumped her in the back of the car. He leant down and found the gun. He put it in his pocket.

Then he got into the driving seat, still trembling. He felt something hard under him. It was the brandy bottle. It was what he needed. He unscrewed the cap and took a long drink.

His brain began to explode even as he reached for the ignition.

It seemed to crackle and flare like burning timber. He grabbed the door handle. Maybe if he walked around . . .

He felt his knees buckle as his feet touched the ground. He strained to keep himself upright. He forced himself to move round the car. When he reached the bonnet, the headlamps glared at him, blinded him.

They began to blink rapidly into his eyes. He tried to raise his hands and cover his eyes. He fell sideways, the lights still blinking. He felt nausea sweep up and through him. He saw the car's licence plate in front of him.

Y O U 099

Y O U 100

Y O U 101

He put out a hand to touch the plate. It seemed normal. Yet the digits were clocking up like the numbers on an adding machine.

Again his brain exploded. A slow, leisurely explosion that subsided and brought a delicious feeling of well-being.

Green clouds like boiled jade, scent of chrysanthemums. Swaying lilies. Bright lines of black and white in front of his eyes. He shut them and opened them again. He was looking up at the blind in his bedroom.

As soon as he realised he was back, Seward jumped off the bed and made for the bench where he'd left the half-finished tranquilomat. He remembered something, felt for the gun he'd taken off the girl. It wasn't there.

But he felt the taste of the brandy in his mouth. Maybe it was as simple as that, he thought. Maybe all he needed to get back was alcohol.

There was sure to be some alcohol in the lab. He searched through cupboards and drawers until he found some in a jar. He filled a vial and corked it. He took off his shirt and taped the vial under his armpit—that way he might be able to transport it from his world to the other one.

Then he got down to work.

Lenses were re-assembled, checked. New filters went in and old ones came out. He adjusted the resonators and amplifiers. He was recharging the battery which powered the transistorised circuits, when he sensed the mob outside. He left the little machine on the bench and went to the control board. He flicked three switches down and then, on impulse, flicked them off again. He went back to the bench and unplugged the charger. He took the machine to the window. He drew the blind up.

It was a smaller mob than usual. Evidently some of them had learned their lesson and were now avoiding the laboratory.

Far away, behind them, the sun glinted on a calm sea. He opened the window.

There was one good way of testing his tranquilomat. He rested it on the sill and switched it to ATTRACT. That was the first necessary stage, to hold the mob's attention. A faint, pleasant humming began to come from the machine. Seward knew that specially shaped and coloured lenses were whirling at the front. The mob looked up towards it, but only those in the centre of the group were held. The others dived away, hiding their eyes.

Seward felt his body tightening, growing cold. Part of him began to scream for the M-A 19. He clung to the machine's carrying handles. He turned a dial from Zero to 50. There were 100 units marked on the indicator. The machine was now sending at half-strength. Seward consoled himself that if anything went wrong he could not do any more harm to their ruined minds. It wasn't much of a consolation.

He quickly saw that the combined simulated brainwaves, sonic vibrations and light patterns were having some effect on their minds. But what was the effect going to be? They were certainly responding. Their bodies were relaxing, their faces were no longer twisted with insanity. But was the tranquilomat actually doing any constructive good—what it had been designed to do? He upped the output to 75 degrees.

His hand began to tremble. His mouth and throat were tight and dry. He couldn't keep going. He stepped back. His stomach ached. His bones ached. His eyes felt puffy. He began to move towards the machine again. But he couldn't make it. He moved towards the half-full ampule of M-A 19 on the table. He filled the blunt hypodermic. He found a vein. He was weeping as the explosions hit his brain.

seven

This time it was different.

He saw an army of machines advancing towards him. An army of malevolent hallucinomats. He tried to run, but a thousand electrodes were clamped to his body and he could not move. From nowhere, needles entered his veins. Voices shouted SEWARD! SEWARD! SEWARD! The hallucinomats advanced, shrilling, blinking, buzzing—*laughing*. The machines were laughing at him.

SEWARD!

Now he saw Farlowe's car's registration plate.

YOU 110

YOU 111

YOU 119

SEWARD!

YOU!

SEWARD!

His brain was being squeezed. It was contracting, contracting. The voices became distant, the machines began to recede. When they had vanished he saw he was standing in a circular room in the centre of which was a low dais. On the dais was a chair. In the chair was the Man Without A Navel. He smiled at Seward.

"Welcome back, old boy," he said.

Brother Sebastian and the woman, Magdalen, stood close to the dais. Magdalen's smile was cool and merciless, seeming to

anticipate some new torture that the Man and Brother Sebastian had devised.

But Seward was jubilant. He was sure his little tranquilomat had got results.

"I think I've done it," he said quietly. "I think I've built a workable tranquilomat—and, in a way, it's thanks to you. I had to speed my work up to beat you—and I did it!"

They seemed unimpressed.

"Congratulations, Seward," smiled the Man Without A Navel. "But this doesn't alter the situation, you know. Just because you *have* an antidote doesn't mean we have to use it."

Seward reached inside his shirt and felt for the vial taped under his arm. It had gone. Some of his confidence went with the discovery.

Magdalen smiled. "It was kind of you to drink the drugged brandy."

He put his hands in his jacket pocket.

The gun was back there. He grinned.

"What's he smiling at," Magdalen said nervously.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Brother Sebastian, I believe you have finished work on your version of Seward's hypnomat?"

"I have," said the sighing, cold voice.

"Let's have it in. It is a pity we didn't have it earlier. It would have saved us time—and Seward all his efforts."

The curtains behind them parted and Mr. Hand, Mr. Morl and the Laughing Cavalier wheeled in a huge, bizarre machine that seemed to have a casing of highly-polished gold, silver and platinum. There were two sets of lenses in its domed, head-like top. They looked like eyes staring at Seward.

Was this a conditioning machine like the ones they'd probably used on the human populace? Seward thought it was likely. If they got him with that, he'd be finished. He pulled the gun out of his pocket. He aimed it at the right-hand lens and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared and kicked in his hand, but no bullet left the muzzle. Instead there came a stream of small, brightly coloured globes, something like those used in the attraction device on the tranquilomat. They sped towards the machine, struck it, exploded. The machine buckled and shrilled. It steamed and two discs, like lids, fell across the lenses. The machine rocked backwards and fell over.

The six figures began to converge on him, angrily.

Suddenly, on his left, he saw Farlowe, Martha and Sally step from behind a screen.

"Help me !" he cried to them.

"We can't !" Farlowe yelled. "Use your initiative, son !"

"Initiative ?" He looked down at the gun. The figures were coming closer. The Man Without A Navel smiled slowly. Brother Sebastian tittered. Magdalen gave a low, mocking laugh that seemed—strangely—to be a criticism of his sexual prowess. Mr. Morl and Mr. Hand retained their mournful and cheerful expressions respectively. The Laughing Cavalier flung back his head and—laughed. All around them the screens, which had been little more than head-high were lengthening, widening, stretching up and up.

He glanced back. The screens were growing.

He pulled the trigger of the gun. Again it bucked, again it roared—and from the muzzle came a stream of metallic-grey particles which grew into huge flowers. The flowers burst into flame and formed a wall between him and the six.

He peered around him, looking for Farlowe and the others. He couldn't find them. He heard Farlowe's shout : "Good luck, son !" He heard Martha and Sally crying goodbye. "Don't go !" he yelled.

Then he realised he was alone. And the six were beginning to advance again—malevolent, vengeful.

Around him the screens, covered in weird designs that curled and swirled, ever-changing, were beginning to topple inwards. In a moment he would be crushed.

Again he heard his name being called. SEWARD ! SEWARD !

Was it Martha's voice. He thought so.

"I'm coming," he shouted, and pulled the trigger again.

The Man Without A Navel, Magdalen, Brother Sebastian, the Laughing Cavalier, Mr. Hand and Mr. Morl—all screamed in unison and began to back away from him as the gun's muzzle spouted a stream of white fluid which floated into the air.

Still the screens were falling, slowly, slowly.

The white fluid formed a net of millions of delicate strands. It drifted over the heads of the six. It began to descend. They looked up and screamed again.

"Don't Seward," begged the Man Without A Navel. "Don't, old man—I'll make it worth your while."

Seward watched as the net engulfed them. They struggled and cried and begged.

It did not surprise him much when they began to shrink.

No! They weren't shrinking—he was growing. He was growing over the toppling screens. He saw them fold inwards. He looked down and the screens were like cards folding neatly over the six little figures struggling in the white net. Then, as the screens folded down, the figures were no longer in sight. It got lighter. The screens rolled themselves into a ball.

The ball began to take on a new shape.

It changed colour. And then, there it was—a perfectly formed human skull.

Slowly, horrifyingly, the skull began to gather flesh and blood and muscles to itself. The stuff flowed over it. Features began to appear. Soon, in a state of frantic terror, Seward recognised the face.

It was his own.

His own face, its eyes wide, its lips parted. A tired, stunned, horrified face.

He was back in the laboratory. And he was staring into a mirror.

He stumbled away from the mirror. He saw he wasn't holding a gun in his hand but a hypodermic needle. He looked round the room.

The tranquilomat was still on the window-sill. He went to the window. There, quietly talking among the ruins below, was a group of sane men and women. They were still in rags, still gaunt. But they were sane. That was evident. They were saner than they had ever been before.

He called down to them, but they didn't hear them.

Time for that later, he thought. He sat on the bed, feeling dazed and relieved. He dropped the needle to the floor, certain he wouldn't need to use it again.

It was incredible, but he thought he knew where he had been. The final image of his face in the mirror had given him the last clue.

He had been inside his own mind. The M-A 19 was merely a hallucinogenic after all. A powerful one, evidently, if it could give him the illusion of rope-marks on his wrists, bites on his neck and the rest.

He had escaped into a dream world.

Then he wondered—but why? What good had it done?

He got up and went towards the mirror again.

Then he heard the voice. Martha's voice.

SEWARD! SEWARD! Seward, listen to me!

No, he thought desperately. No, it can't be starting again. There's no need for it.

He ran into the laboratory, closing the door behind him, locking it. He stood there, trembling, waiting for the withdrawal symptoms. They didn't come.

Instead he saw the walls of the laboratory, the silent computers and meters and dials, begin to blurr. A light flashed on above his head. The dead banks of instruments suddenly came alive. He sat down in a big chrome, padded chair which had originally been used for the treating of test-subjects.

His gaze was caught by a whirling stroboscope that had appeared from nowhere. Coloured images began to form in front of his eyes. He struggled to get up but he couldn't.

YOU 121

YOU 122

YOU 123

Then the first letter changed to a V.

VOU 127

SEWARD!

His eyelids fell heavily over his eyes.

"Professor Seward." It was Martha's voice. It spoke to someone else. "We may be lucky, Tom. Turn down the volume."

He opened his eyes.

"Martha."

The woman smiled. She was dressed in a white coat and was leaning over the chair. She looked very tired. "I'm not—Martha—Professor Seward. I'm Doctor Kalin. Remember?"

"Doctor Kalin, of course."

His body felt weaker than it had ever felt before. He leaned back in the big chair and sighed. Now he was remembering.

It had been his decision to make the experiment. It had seemed to be the only way of speeding up work on the development of the tranquilomats. He knew that the secret of a workable machine was imbedded in the deepest level of his unconscious mind. But, however much he tried—hypnosis, symbol-association, word-association—he couldn't get at it.

There was only one way he could think of—a dangerous experiment for him—an experiment which might not work at all. He would be given a deep-conditioning, made to believe that he had brought disaster to the world and must remedy it by devising a tranquilomat. Things were pretty critical in the world outside, but they weren't as bad as they had conditioned him to believe. Work on the tranquilomats *was* falling behind—but there had been no widespread disaster, *yet*. It was bound to come unless they could devise some means of mass-cure for the thousands of neurotics and victims of insanity. An antidote for the results of mass-tension.

So, simply, they conditioned him to think his efforts had destroyed civilisation. He must devise a working tranquilomat. They had turned the problem from an intellectual one into a personal one.

The conditioning had apparently worked.

He looked around the laboratory at his assistants. They were all alive, healthy, a bit tired, a bit strained, but they looked relieved.

"How long have I been under?" he asked.

"About fourteen hours. That's twelve hours since the experiment went wrong."

"Went wrong?"

"Why, yes," said Doctor Kalin in surprise. "Nothing was happening. We tried to bring you round—we tried every darned machine and drug in the place—nothing worked. We expected catatonia. At least we've managed to save you. We'll just have to go on using the ordinary methods of research, I suppose." Her voice was tired, disappointed.

Seward frowned. But he *had* got the results. He knew exactly how to construct a working tranquilomat. He thought back.

"Of course," he said. "I was only conditioned to believe that the world was in ruins and I had done it. There was nothing about—about—the *other* world."

"What other world?" Macpherson, his Chief Assistant asked the question.

Seward told them. He told them about the Man Without A Navel, the fortress, the corridors, the tortures, the landscapes seen from Farlowe's car, the park, the maze, the Vampire, Magdalen . . . He told them how, in what he now called Condition A, he had believed himself hooked on a drug called M-A 19.

"But we don't have a drug called M-A 19," said Doctor Kalin.

"I know that now. But I didn't know that and it didn't matter. I would have found something to have made the journey into—the other world—a world existing only in my skull. Call it Condition B, if you like—or Condition X, maybe. The unknown. I found a fairly logical means of making myself *believe* I was entering another world. That was M-A 19. By inventing symbolic characters who were trying to stop me, I made myself work harder. Unconsciously I knew that Condition A was going wrong—so I escaped into Condition B in order to put right the damage. By acting out the drama I was able to clear my mind of its confusion. I had, as I suspected, the secret of the tranquilomat somewhere down there all the time. Condition A failed to release that secret—Condition B succeeded. I can build you a workable tranquilomat, don't worry."

"Well," Macpherson grinned. "I've been told to use my imagination in the past—but you *really* used yours !"

"That was the idea, wasn't it ? We'd decided it was no good just using drugs to keep us going. We decided to use our drugs and hallucinomats directly, to condition me to believe that what we feared will happen, *had* happened."

"I'm glad we didn't manage to bring you back to normality, in that case," Doctor Kalin smiled. "You've had a series of classic—if more complicated than usual—nightmares. The Man Without A Navel, as you call him, and his 'allies' symbolised the elements in you that were holding you back from the truth—diverting you. By 'defeating' the Man, you defeated those elements."

"It was a hell of a way to get results," Seward grinned. "But I got them. It was probably the only way. Now we can produce as many tranquilomats as we need. The problem's over. I've—in all modesty—" he grinned, "saved the world before it needed saving. It's just as well."

"What about your 'helpers,' though," said Doctor Kalin helping him from the chair. He glanced into her intelligent, mature face. He had always liked her.

"Maybe," he smiled, as he walked towards the bench where the experimental tranquilomats were laid out, "maybe there was quite a bit of wish-fulfillment mixed up in it as well."

"It's funny how you didn't realise that it wasn't real, isn't it ?" said Macpherson behind him.

"Why is it funny?" he turned to look at Macpherson's long, worn face. "Who knows what's real, Macpherson. This world? That world? Any other world? I don't feel so adamant about this one, do you?"

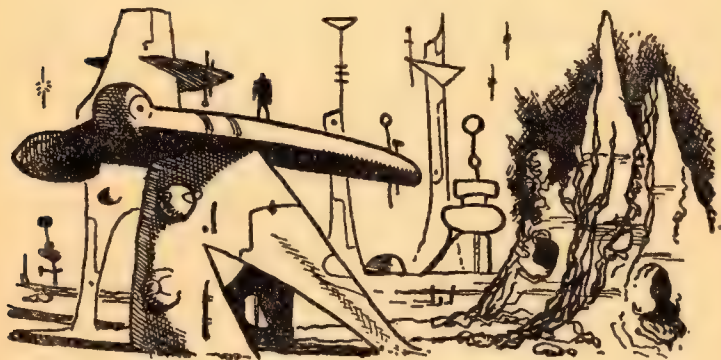
"Well . . ." Macpherson said doubtfully. "I mean, you're a trained psychiatrist as well as everything else. You'd think you'd recognise your own symbolic characters?"

"I suppose it's possible." Macpherson had missed his point. "All the same," he added. "I wouldn't mind going back there some day. I'd quite enjoy the exploration. And I liked some of the people. Even though they were probably wish-fulfillment figures. Farlowe—father—it's possible." He glanced up as his eye fell on a meter. It consisted of a series of code-letters and three digits. VOU 128 it said now. There was Farlowe's number-plate. His mind had turned the V into a Y. He'd probably discover plenty of other symbols around, which he'd turned into something else in the other world. He still couldn't think of it as a dream world. It had seemed so real. For him, it was still real.

"What about the woman—Martha?" Doctor Kalin said. "You called *me* Martha as you were waking up."

"We'll let that one go for the time being," he grinned. "Come on, we've still got a lot of work to do."

—James Colvin



The mask hung on the wall of the local tavern for all to plainly see — somehow it had an objection to being taken down or even away from the premises.

THE FACE OF MARK FENTON

BY W. T. WEBB

“I warn you,” the drunken man said, pointing to the mask behind the bar. “If you take that face away from here you do so at your peril.”

Daniel Broderick, traveller and curio-collector, laughed and slapped the banknotes down on the counter of the rowdy bar-room. The customers were mostly seamen from the nearby harbour and the women who enlivened their brief jaunts ashore. Those nearest Broderick, and the two buxom barmaids, went silent for a while as the landlord of the *Jamaica Arms* scooped up the money, counted it expertly, and folded it into his wallet.

Swaying drunkenly, the man who had issued the warning, shot a look of agonised pity at the mask on the wall. Then he finished off his whisky and staggered out into the stormy November night. The opening of the door sent a gust of damp sea-air into the smoky room and caused a momentary chilly silence. Then the door closed again with a slam. And the chatter and laughter were resumed with increased volume.

"That was Ted Groom," the landlord said. "Poor ol' Ted! Never been the same since his pal died. Used to be quite a character."

Broderick nodded; but his eyes were fixed impatiently on the mask for which he had just paid good money.

"Ol' Fenton was a sculptor, you know," the landlord went on unhurriedly, leaving the barmaids to cope with the trade. "One of my best customers. He made that mask as a sort of self-portrait just before he died."

Broderick watched the man turn round to take the mask down from the wall. He had to lever it with a screwdriver and tug at it before it would come away.

"Darn thing didn't want to come off the wall," the landlord said as he wiped the article with a bar-cloth and handed it to Broderick. "Just like old Fenton himself—it was the devil's own job to get him out of this bar."

Broderick took the mask and examined it closely. It felt rubbery, and heavier than he would have supposed. The humid atmosphere of the room had warmed and moistened it so that to the touch it was almost like living flesh. As a work of art it was obviously a masterpiece—a worthy addition to Broderick's collection of curios.

Playfully, Broderick tweaked the longish nose and drew the features into a comic expression of pain. The eyes seemed to cloud over with impotent wrath, and the mouth gape in a soundless scream.

Broderick was delighted with his find. From the moment he had set foot in that grubby, disreputable waterfront public house, the mask hanging behind the bar had fascinated him.

It was the lifesize face of a man in his late fifties, a face veined and discoloured by hard living and heavy drinking, and it was so utterly lifelike that it almost seemed that a living man was looking through a hole in the wall and maliciously observing the boisterous goings-on and listening with lewd enjoyment to the coarse language of the seafaring men and the seductive laughter of the girls.

The remarkable thing about the face, apart from its vividness, was its evil expression. It was the face of a thorough-going rogue. The cheek bones were high and narrow, the nose narrow and long. Thick-lipped and lascivious, the mouth was bracketted by a drooping moustache. Then the face sloped away to a weak chin. But it was the eyes which first

gripped Broderick's attention. They were long, sly-looking and heavy-lidded—the bleary eyes of a drunken rascal. If Mark Fenton had meant it as a self-portrait he had certainly not flattered himself.

“Mind how you go!” the landlord shouted when Broderick said goodnight. “Don't forget Ted Groom's prophecy!”

A peal of laughter followed Broderick as he carried the mask out into the night.

The sea sounded rough in the harbour. Spray cascaded across the road. The hanging sign of the *Jamaica Arms* swung violently back and forth with much creaking and clanking.

As Daniel Broderick drove home along the coast road he kept glancing down at the mask on the seat beside him. He had propped it up in the corner, so that those cunning eyes gazed at him as he drove. It was almost like having a companion in the car with him—a bodiless hitch-hiker! And unlike most hitch-hikers, this one, apparently, did not feel the need to make conversation. But nevertheless, after a while Broderick found that his attention was more on the mask than on his driving. So he tossed the offending article over into the back seat. He musn't have an accident, he told himself, or Ted Groom's drunken prophecy of disaster would come true.

Wind blew in a fury as he drove up the hill leading to his house. He could feel it buffetting against the side of the car and hear it howling in the roadside trees and roaring above the breakers that battered against the cliff on which his house was built.

His servant was away tonight, and the place was in darkness—a black silhouette against the cloud-beaten stars. The car's headlights picked out in turn the white gateposts, the wind-tossed trees in the garden, and the open door of the garage.

When the car was stopped he looked on the back seat for the mask of Mark Fenton, but it had disappeared. After fumbling in the semi-darkness of the garage for several minutes he located it on the floor of the car where it had fallen. But the thing was far too rubbery to be damaged by such a fall, he decided. One could drop it from the cliff-top without any damage being done to it.

Indoors in his study, he lit the gas-fire and poured himself out a stiff tot of rum. For a while he stood warming his hands at the fire and feeling the neat spirit flow down inside him, while outside the house the wind roared frenziedly in the trees. Then he sat down to look at the most recent addition to his collection of curios. Most of his stuff had been acquired during his travels. Not often was he lucky enough to find something interesting almost on his own doorstep.

His gaze roved round his walls and rested for a while on an Australian boomerang, a shrunk head from the Amazon, a variety of spears and shields, a witch-doctor's devil-mask, a carved Chinese dragon, and an ancient map of Barbados embellished with pictures of galleons, signs of the zodiac and mythical monsters of the deep.

"You must have been a real old rascal, Mr. Fenton," he said to the mask, which he had propped against a book on his desk. And Mark Fenton's face looked back at him. Those long, cunning eyes regarded him cynically, and below the drooping moustache, the lips were twisted into a diabolical leer.

Gale-force winds blowing across the garden shook the french windows and made the gasfire splutter. The heavy curtains should be pulled across the windows; but he could not be bothered to do it. Solly Johnson, the retired ship's cook who worked for him was out on his day off. So tonight he would be alone in the gale-tossed old house on the cliff-top.

Brodreick was tired. The encounter with Ted Groom and the landlord of the *Jamaica*, and the drive through the infernally windy night, had drained him of energy. He was about to place the mask on the wall and retire for the night, when he wondered what the thing was made of. Mark Fenton had been a sculptor of some sort. Of what material had he fashioned his mask?

Rubber or some kind of resilient plastic seemed the nearest answer. Broderick remembered holding a Japanese doll the size of a fully-grown woman, which was made of a similar material. But it was hardly the stuff in which an English sculptor would work.

He picked up a razor-blade he used for sharpening pencils, and made a little cut in the lobe of the mask's left ear. And immediately blood spread over the ear-lobe and down on to the desk.

"What the devil!" Broderick exclaimed, dropping the mask to the floor. For a moment he stared down at it with horror and watched a little patch of blood appear on the cream carpet. Then a pain in his right index-finger told him he had cut himself.

Dropping the razor-blade, he sucked the blood off his finger, and, after bandaging it with a handkerchief, lifted the mask back on his desk. After another stiff tot of rum he took himself upstairs to bed.

He fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed that the mask of Mark Fenton was talking huskily. Those slack lips were opening and closing over a mobile tongue and decayed, broken teeth, and in voice little louder than a whisper, the mask was issuing a long, blasphemous monologue, and calling upon the devil for help.

Broderick tossed and turned, sweating and groaning in his sleep. A crash downstairs woke him. He opened his eyes in complete darkness and lay for a while listening to the booming wind, and thinking of Ted Groom's prophecy. What if the cliff crumbled away under the onslaught of the wind and waves? That was crazy, he told himself. Then, putting on the light, he went down to see what caused the crash that woke him.

In the study he found the french window had burst open. Papers from his desk had blown all round the room, and the mask of Mark Fenton, which he had left on the desk beside a pile of books, had been blown down and rolled into a corner.

Wind breathed cold against his bare ankles. His flimsy pyjamas provided little protection as he pushed the window shut and replaced the catch. This time he bolted the window and drew the curtains across, shutting out a wild scene of storm-harrassed clouds and flickering moonlight above the tops of the trees.

After returning his papers and the mask to the desk, he put the light out and went up to bed.

Normally Broderick was a good sleeper. But once disturbed he found it hard to go back to sleep. The narcotic effects of the rum had worn off, leaving him with a nasty taste in his mouth. For a long time he lay tossing and turning and thinking about matters which in daylight would never occur to him.

Ted Groom's warning, for example. "If you take that face away from here you do so at your peril."

What a crazy thing to say! The man was obviously drunk. It wasn't a face, but a mask. And how could anybody be in peril just for buying a mask from the landlord of an English pub? The notion was preposterous. Ted Groom was a psychopath—an obvious alcoholic. To the devil with him!

And yet . . . Broderick had to admit there was something strange, something almost diabolical about the mask. It was almost as though the darn thing had a personality. He began to wonder about the sculptor Mark Fenton. According to the landlord of the pub, Fenton had made the mask just before he died. What did he die of, Broderick wondered; and did he know he was going to die when he made the mask?

The wind subsided a little. For a while it sank to a mere hissing in the cliff-top trees. And above the sound of it he could hear the waters dashing on the beach and the occasional sound of a hooter in the harbour. The restless, mysterious sea, Broderick thought, and wondered if he would ever sail on it again. There were so many places he wanted to visit before his final voyage into the unknown.

Then the gale woke again with renewed violence. Broderick listened to it howling over the sea, rushing up the face of the cliff, and keening among the trees and chimneys of his home. He remembered a time at sea in the Indian Ocean when the ship in which he was travelling encountered a hurricane, and he lay below decks waiting fearfully for the bulkheads to smash asunder under the terrible fury of the elements.

Suddenly his thoughts were jerked back to the present time and place. For the house was awakened by a great crack followed by the cacaphony of broken glass. And even before he got downstairs he knew that one of the trees outside the study had snapped and fallen through the window.

Ever since they had moved into the old house, Solly Johnson had been warning him about those trees nearest the study. Some people seem to have a natural antipathy to trees. Johnson wanted to fell them. But Broderick took a liking to the restful, almost gloomy atmosphere with which they vested the room.

Downstairs the study was a shambles. Broken glass, scattered papers, and ruined books littered the floor. Many of his curios had fallen down from the walls. The swinging electric lamps revealed dolls, carvings, shields, pictures, head-dresses, and hunting trophies scattered about the floor and furniture. Trust Solly Johnson to have his night off when he was really wanted, Broderick thought peevishly. Perhaps this was the peril that Ted Groom had warned him about.

In any case there was no sign of Mark Fenton's mask. A hurried search told him it was not in the room. Somehow the wind, which had hurled the tree against the window, breaking the glass and rending the curtain, had snatched it away. The devil had taken his own. And in his present mood Broderick was not sorry to have seen the last of it in his home, in spite of the money he had paid for it. He hoped it was somewhere at the bottom of the cliff by now, and the evil face of Mark Fenton was being churned by the turbulent water, or maybe washed away to some distant shore.

Broderick was not superstitious by nature; but his travels in the wilder areas of the world had convinced him of the reality of certain occult phenomena. In many places evil spirits were feared and placated. He liked to keep an open mind about such things.

The wind was docile now, and when Broderick returned to bed he slept soundly and dreamlessly until late in the morning. When he woke he felt remarkably refreshed. The sounds of Solly Johnson singing as he worked in the kitchen helped to disperse the troubled memories of the night.

It would be wrong to say that after ten days Daniel Broderick had forgotten the mask of Mark Fenton. But other matters intervened in his life to take his mind off it. No doubt the affair would have faded in his memory like many other adventures which seemed momentous at the time of their occurrence, but one evening he stopped his car along the coast road to give a lift to a hitch-hiker who stood beside a roadside lamp.

As soon as the man got into the car Broderick recognised him as Ted Groom. At that moment the man was sober, but obviously he had recently done a lot of heavy drinking.

His eyes were red-rimmed, he stank of stale booze, and as he took his seat in the car his hands shook violently.

"Mr. Groom, I believe," Broderick said as he leaned across him to close the door with a snap.

"That's right! Can't say I know you, though. Memory ain't what it used to be."

"You were a friend of Mark Fenton, the sculptor," Broderick said, driving forward.

Groom nodded. His face assumed an expression of drunken sorrow. Broderick took his gaze away from him and concentrated on his driving. For once the coast road was quiet. The evening rush-hour was past, and it was still too early for the nightly homeward stampede from cinemas, pubs and cafes.

"Poor old Mark," Groom said softly as though to himself.

"What did he die of?" Broderick asked, but the other, lost in his own private musings, took no notice of the question.

The headlights sprayed silver on the dark road-surface. To the right, beyond the line of lamps, the sea glowed faintly under a sickly moon. Buoy-lights twitched nervously. Some distance away a big ship moved in a blaze of lights like a floating super-market. Then, after a patch of tree-silhouetted darkness, the harbour-lights glowed ahead. And on the left gleamed the squat windows of the *Jamaica Arms*.

"I get off here," Groom said abruptly. "Thanks for the ride. Drop me anywhere you like."

Broderick swung the wheel and aimed the bonnet at the in-drive of the *Jamaica* park. Then he straightened her up.

"Let's take a drink!" he suggested. "I'd like to know a little more about Mark Fenton."

Groom nodded eagerly and they went into the public bar where Broderick paid for the drinks. They carried them to a table and sat down. "Good health!" Broderick said.

Groom shakily raised his glass.

"May heaven protect us," he responded. His hand trembled violently as he drank; but by some miracle none of the stuff was spilt from his glass. Broderick drank slowly. His companion, he observed, was far gone in his alcoholism, and his tongue was soon loosened.

"How did Mark Fenton die?" Broderick asked once more.

Groom took a deep drink.

"Mark Fenton blew his own brains out! That's how he died. The doctor gave him three months to live. But he couldn't wait that long. It's funny when you come to think of it—funny as hell!"

"What's funny about it?"

Once again Broderick got the impression that Ted Groom was crazy. But his reply was coherent enough, although strange to the point of incredibility.

"It was funny, because the day before he shot himself he made a pact with the devil to keep him alive for another twenty years."

Broderick shrugged sceptically. Although he felt sure that pure evil existed in the world, he found it hard to believe in a personal devil. "Do you believe in such things?" he asked over his glass.

Groom laughed bitterly. For a moment his bloodshot eyes seemed to look into the past. The pause lasted so long, that Broderick thought he would not get an answer to his question, but then Groom said: "Mark Fenton did; and that's all that matters. He made a pact with the devil. Sold his soul to him on condition that he'd be able to show his face in this bar for the next twenty years. Then he went and shot himself, the very next day."

"Must have been insane," Broderick commented.

"Possessed by the devil," Groom said with a grim laugh.

"Well, so far as the pact's concerned," Broderick said complacently "Fenton's got nothing to worry about, seeing that he's dead now; and the devil obviously hasn't kept his part of the bargain."

"That's where you're wrong," Groom said, taking the other by the sleeve and guiding him to the far end of the bar.

The air here was thick with smoke. Drunken laughter rose from a group of sailors and girls, and above it all, on the wall, the living mask of Mark Fenton looked down with an evil leer.

—W. T. Webb

Spiro had been wandering the world looking for one specific tree—when he finally found it it was way out in the Australian bush, unwanted, unattended . . .

THE NEW COUNTRY

BY JOHN BAXTER

With a last despairing wail the train disappeared around the bend, dragging its carriages behind it like a ragged procession. Spiro watched it go with a vague regret. He had no especially fond memories of the journey he had just completed and, although this final parting with the train represented the end of a period in his life, there had already been too many endings for him to get sentimental about yet another. Nevertheless he felt a sense of loss, as if a door had been closed that could never be reopened. So he stood watching until the train was no more than a plume of grey smoke and a sound among the hills. Then, deliberately, he picked up his battered suitcase and walked to the gate.

The old man who collected his ticket was as weatherbeaten as the station buildings. He took the slip of pasteboard without comment, even though Spiro had been the only passenger to get off here and strangers must have been few and far between. He opened his mouth to utter the automatic "Hot enough for you?" but closed it again, the words

unspoken. The morning's dry lassitude made even breathing a task almost too uncomfortable to face.

Feeling a little foolish he moved out on to the narrow verandah in front of the station and looked around. The view was as simple and featureless as a child's drawing; brown hills, blinding the sky, a red road scrawled around the curve of the nearest rise. It was a typically Australian landscape. In all his years in the country Spiro had never accustomed himself to its spare, often bleak directness.

He found the old man where he had left him dozing in the shady stationmaster's box. Clearing his throat purposely he had the satisfaction of seeing him lurch out of sleep with a jerk.

"This is Curumbena, isn't it?" he said.

The old man blinked and looked up at the weathered sign as if to refresh his memory.

"Curumbena" he said slowly. "Yeah, this is it."

"I was told there was a town."

"Oh yes, there's a town all right." He looked up at Spiro as if this answered the question. Finally he seemed to realise that a little elaboration was necessary. He pointed off down the road.

"About two, three miles. This is only the rail junction."

Spiro went back to the verandah and picked up his case. No need to ask if there were cabs or a bus; out here, people were either rich enough to ride or too poor to mind walking. Resignedly he set off down the road under the harsh sun, knowing that it would be a long hard slog. He did not have the body for walking. On the short solid bones, muscle had been laid in slabs. Like a primitive sculptor the architect of this human being had been less concerned with aesthetics than with creating a machine for digging, carrying, fighting. But it was ill-suited to walking in the sun with a heavy suitcase. As the perspiration dampened his hair it fell in limp black curls over his forehead. Red dust rose around his feet, marbling them with grime. Then, supremely irritating, the flies began to swarm.

Spiro stood this for a few minutes, but then his usually even temper boiled over. Muttering under his breath he passed his free hand once, twice, three times around his face. The flies rose in a buzzing cloud, hovering close by until the

disturbance stopped and they could settle again. They never had the opportunity. Spiro snapped his fingers. Instantly all around his head a score of sparks blazed briefly, bright even in the sunlight. What was left of the flies fell to the ground in a shower of tiny cinders. He smiled. It had been a lot of trouble to pick up tricks like that but they came in handy more than once.

Curumbena was much as he had imagined it; a puddle of tin-roofed houses at the bottom of a shallow valley, a wide and dusty main street, hot and empty even at noon, and the inevitable pub with wide verandahs and hitching rings set into the posts. Spiro headed straight for the hotel, dumped his case on the verandah and walked inside. In the bar it was cool and shady. Behind the counter a man in shirtsleeves was reading a newspaper. At the sight of a customer he put down his paper and moved along the bar with a welcoming smile. Spiro fumbled for a coin and laid it down on the counter.

"Pint, please."

"Pint it is." The man drew the beer expertly and set it down in front of him. With proprietary interest he watched as Spiro drained half of it.

"Hot out," he said conversationally.

Spiro nodded, sipping gratefully at the ice-cold liquid.

"Visitor?"

"Just passing through."

"Be going out for the shearing, I expect?"

Spiro drank a little more of the beer. "Might do that," he said.

A long pause. Among the rafters a blow-fly buzzed drunkenly.

"Er . . . you wouldn't be one of Nick Guareschi's boys, would you?"

"Never heard of him. Why?"

"Well . . . the accent . . ."

Spiro ignored the hook.

"Lots of your people out there at the shearing sheds. Poles, Yugoslavs, Russians. Er . . . you Polish?"

"Greek."

"Greek, eh? No, well I can't say there are many Greeks around here."

Spiro finished the beer and reached into his pocket. The piece of paper he took out was creased and sweatstained but

he handled it as one would a precious manuscript. Unfolding it he spread it out on the counter.

"Ever see this place?"

It was a photograph clipped from a magazine. Even by the poor standards of magazine printing it was not especially good, but the essentials were there. Against a low blue range of hills three trees reached for the sky. One, larger than the others, stood proud and strong on the crest of a small rise. In this sun-dried landscape its blue-green foliage clashed with the pale freshness of the gums. The tree was an echo of the past, a piece of ancient times brought back unaccountably into this modern age. Even now Spiro could not look at the picture without feeling some of the excitement that had possessed him the first time, and which had drawn him this far from home.

The publican fumbled in his pocket for his glasses, put them on and peered carefully at the paper.

"Seems familiar," he said. "Not many trees like that one around here. What is it—pine of some kind?"

"Cypress," Spiro said impatiently. "Have you seen it?"

"Wait, on . . . The man rubbed his forehead. "Something coming to me." He frowned in concentration. "Ah, I remember. A photographer bloke was through here a few months back. On holidays, taking a few photos on the side. Anyway he took some out along the Bethungra road. Seemed very happy about them too, though he didn't mention any trees. But you might try out there."

"How far?"

"Couple of miles maybe. Just follow the main road out of town—you can't miss the turn-off."

Spiro refolded the paper and pushed his way out through the screen door. A few minutes later the publican came to the verandah and squinted down the wavering road at the disappearing figure already distorted by the heat. The battered suitcase stood abandoned on the step. He shouted after him and, when there was no reply, shook his head in bewilderment. These migrants were pretty odd, but this one had been odder than most.

Now that he was so close to the end of his journey, Spiro found the walking less irksome than it had been. The dust beneath his feet was almost silky in its talcum fineness, the flies kept away, and the sun shone rather than blazed. With the town behind him, the trees rose on either side of the road,

arching over it to make a fretted tunnel of shade, soothing and cool. Automatically he walked more freely, stepping out in a way he had not dared before; the sudden remembrance of his loneliness too often brought him back to earth with a cruel thump. But now, full of confidence for the first time in many years, he could afford the luxury of happiness.

It took him more than an hour to reach his goal. The tree didn't appear suddenly as he had half-expected it to. There was no dramatic revelation, no shock of recognition. Long before he reached it, the tree appeared as a spot of dark green hung tantalisingly a mile in front of him. When finally he came as far as the road could take him, he stood silent for a moment, still, feeling inside him the slow release of fears and tensions accumulated over years of searching.

Until now he had never been really sure, never believed completely that the thing he was seeking actually existed. Now here it was, beckoning to him. Feeling as spry and foolish as a schoolboy he leaped the leaning fence in one bound, ran high stepping through the tall grass and came finally to the cool shade of the tree. The bark of its trunk was rough, dark, crannied, secret. Almost fearfully he put his hand against it.

"All right," he said, "you can come out now."

His voice soaked unanswered into the warm air. Only an end to the hum of insects and the restless scuttling of the birds above showed that anything had disturbed the afternoon. He paused, then laid his hand firmer against the trunk.

"I said, come out. I command you."

Still nothing.

Spiro scabbled around in his memory for the right words.

"Very well, then, if you insist." He drew a deep breath.

"By Apollo, by Diana, by the powers of the earth and the air, by the . . ."

"Oh, don't bother," said a peevish voice from the bough above him. He looked up. The face that glared down at him was sharp, impish; wide slanted eyes, a mouth as thin and bitter as tree sap, black hair bound back with a band of woven grass. In the green gloom there was a tantalising suggestions of long legs, white skin.

"Come on down from there," he said, carefully casual.

"I won't hurt you."

The face grinned derisively. "I may be young but I'm not foolish," she said. "I thought we were rid of your kind out here. Go away."

It seemed to Spiro that this was not said with any real firmness. He pressed his advantage.

"You don't mean that," he said.

"Don't I?" A moment later a piece of dead wood cracked down on his head. He swore long and bitterly at the intransigence of all women. Pushing back his hair, purposely kept long, he felt the spot between the horns where the wood had raised a lump. It felt odd to have the air touching his forehead after all this time. Almost defiantly he pushed back the hair and let the two stubby horns jut out, aggressively masculine.

"That hurt," he said.

"It was meant to. Go away."

Spiro looked around at the empty landscape. "Where to?"

"Suit yourself. I'm sure you have a few friends to get drunk with."

A few friends? The remark took him unawares and it was half a minute before he had recovered his wits. Leaning against the trunk he looked upwards. From here he could see her better, a tense sinewy figure ready to leap upwards into the branches if he should make a false move. Her unselfconscious grace made his mouth go dry. To lose this now would be unbearable.

"I don't have any friends," he said slowly. "You and I, we're the last ones."

"The last? Nonsense!"

Spiro shook his head. "It's true. In the old country, they're all dead. The trees are torn down, the fields covered in houses, people everywhere."

"But the old ones. Surely they . . ."

"All gone. Even He has gone."

Her face was full of sorrow. It seemed to descend on her like a cloud shadow, masking every thought, every action.

"How did you get here?" she said eventually.

"It's a long story. Why don't you come down . . ."

In a second, like the sudden return of sunlight, her impishness was back. It was pale by comparison with her previous gaiety, but it was there. She laughed.

"I must be getting old. You nearly caught me that time."

"Surely you're not going to stay up there forever?"

"We'll see." There was a crackling in the branches and a pale shape moving upwards.

Spiro watched for a while, then wandered out into the sun and sat on a rock. He knew that it would not be long before she came back down to him. For all her nervousness she was typical of her kind, and it was not in her makeup to stay concerned with one problem for any length of time.

Even her sorrow at his news had not lasted.

Automatically he reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered set of pipes. They had not travelled well; one of the fastenings was undone and lint had clogged some of the reeds, but when he put them to his lips the tone was as clear as ever. He paused a moment, thinking, then he took up the melody of the oldest song he knew, the lament of the mountain shepherd. Even here, far from Olympus, it held the same sad sweetness.

—John Baxter

The Editor Regrets . . .

to announce to all readers that this issue of **SCIENCE FANTASY** is the last to be published by Nova Publications Ltd., after thirteen years of continuous appearance.

Arrangements have been made, however, for its continued publication by Roberts & Vinter, Ltd., 44 Milkwood Road, London, S.E.24, from whom an announcement will be forthcoming.

Your Editor regrets that owing to other commitments he will not be connected with the new enterprise.

John Carnell

Article

In this final article, Michael Moorcock explains his definition of the difference between fantasy and science fiction and ends with a tribute to Science Fantasy, of which this will be the last issue to be published by Nova Publications Ltd.

Aspects of Fantasy

4. Conclusion

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

For reasons that are now obvious to you, I am forced to wind this series up faster than I should have liked. I shall have to draw conclusions which will not be as well-illustrated as I had hoped. In the planned discussions of books, themes and characters, I should like to have shown that whereas the form which I've loosely called Fantasy is a creative and dynamic form (if not as important as I sometimes like to think) its more recent off-shoot Science Fiction is on the whole a self-defeating, self-limiting form—that where it is good is usually in the elements which it has borrowed from Fantasy or mainstream fiction.

A number of books have dealt with the development of Science Fiction from Verne or Wells, but none, so far as I know, have dealt with its literary development from earlier times. I have already partially described various aspects of Fantasy which have gone to form many of the ingredients of modern Science Fiction, but before I go on to say why I think Fantasy has it over Science Fiction, I'd like to deal with a couple of

modern branches of fantasy which have developed from the Gothic phase of the 18th and 19th centuries.

One of these is usually termed the Sword and Sorcery story. The other has no name that I know of, perhaps because it is rarely published these days. This is the story dealing with what Harry Levin has described as the 'haunted palace of the mind'—Otranto, Udolpho, Usher, Gormenghast, etc.

These two settings are connected in that they are both private worlds created from the author's imagination, having no evident connection with the history or geography of the earth we know, yet it is accepted that they *are* on earth. They are mythical worlds—worlds which the author's private mythology has created.

They differ in that one is boundless, horizonless, depending on adventure and supernatural marvels for its basic plot-ingredients, and the other is bounded, enclosed, oppressive, depending largely upon its interplay of characters.

The first is a development of the Gothic historical romance, the second is a development of the Gothic haunted castle story, the origins of which have already been touched upon elsewhere in this series.

It would be foolish to describe either of the outstanding modern examples of each stream as 'Gothic novels,' but they do contain many of the refined elements of the earlier type. They are both trilogies by British writers—namely Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Peake's *Titus Groan* books.

I know that both authors have been surprised that people link their work. Yet there *is* a link in that both have created rich, closely-detailed imaginary landscapes bearing little or no relation to the earth we know. Both, also, have used 'innocents' as their central characters. Peake has used a child, Titus, while Tolkien has used child-like creatures—the Hobbits.

Peake's novels are, in other ways, far superior to Tolkien's, because Peake places emphasis on his characters, whereas Tolkien is content to write a classic tale of doom, marvels and high adventure. I find, also, that Peake's images stay in the mind, but I find it extremely difficult to conjure up distinct images of Tolkien's Middle Earth. Also Peake's characters actually develop as the story goes on, while Tolkien's characters do not.

The 'haunted palace of the mind' was the dominant theme in Gothic fiction. Elements from this theme have been used in mainstream fiction (Murdoch's *The Unicorn* is a recent, example), other branches of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

Shortly after Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was published (1764), a novel appeared which claimed to be influenced by *Otranto* and also called itself 'A Gothic Tale.' This was Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777)—a story which yearned, like Walpole's, for an Age of Chivalry that never was and was influenced by Mediaeval Romance. Historical romances of this type did not share the same popularity, for a long while, that the 'haunted castle' story had. These stories, of course, were tales of chivalry, nobility, adventure, knights, quests, dooms and naturally, the stock marvels of the Gothic—spectres, living portraits and the rest. As quite often happens, these rather poor tales influenced much better writers and there is little doubt that Byron, Shelley and other Romantics came, when young, under the influence of the Gothic fantasists and that the Gothic moods coloured their own ideas. It may be making an overlarge claim, but it is possible to imagine that we might not have had *Childe Harold* or even *Idylls of the King* without the first Gothic Romances. These Romances were much influenced by the stories of Arthur, Charlemagne and El Cid, as well as the Teutonic sagas and the later 'fake' Romances such as *Amadis of Gaul* which Southey translated in the early part of the 19th century (see *Introduction* to this series). Compared to the haunted castle background, this theme was not, it seems, as popular, but it certainly encouraged Sir Walter Scott to write his Waverley Novels and in turn influence a huge body of historical novelists who doubtless, in turn, influenced the 'Sword and Sorcery' writers of whom Lord Dunsany is recognisably the first.

Dunsany's Sword and Sorcery tales are rarely reprinted, these days. They were written in the last part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries.

The Sword of Welleran is apparently one of the best, dealing with a youth who lives in a city once protected by a group of rather Charlemagnian paladins. When the city is attacked, he takes the sword of the chief hero, Welleran, and, disguised as the hero, drives the invaders back.

From my own limited reading of Dunsany's tales, they seem to be rather slight, depending largely on a deliberately archaic style used to evoke a nostalgic, highly-coloured mood which tends to pall in even the shortest of the stories.

Dunsany seems to have influenced two later writers—Clark Ashton Smith (who doesn't have his demerits to quite the same extent) and J. R. R. Tolkien who has Dunsany's demerits, but compensates for them with other merits of his own.

Smith would appear to be one of Robert E. Howard's influences. Smith wrote of Hyperboria, Atlantis, of 'pre-historic' civilisations of the past and civilisations of the future which seem exactly like them. His stories were, like Dunsany's, anecdotal and slight. Otherwise, Howard was influenced by contemporary writers of historical and oriental adventure, who had, in turn, been influenced by Scott, Conan Doyle and other historical novelists.

Howard's rough, erotic-exotic, violent prose had the archaicisms of Dunsany and Smith, but where they had built highly-mannered 'prose-poems,' Howard told stories. Howard's style was a combination of the best and the worst in Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Lovecraft and commercial hack-writers, filling the pulps of his day. His plots were involved, if not very original, and held the reader, in its rawness, its wildness and emphasis on physical strength and prowess, Howard's work was more of an 'American' type than the others. Its hero was not the sensitive, delicate, shadow-creature of Dunsany's wish-world, but the virile barbarian, the iconoclast, the sneerer at authority and learning—in fact, Howard's Conan is the idealised American frontiersman in quasi-mediaeval clothing, with a sword instead of a long gun. Yet Conan, too, is essentially an innocent.

Fritz Leiber was the next important contributor to the growing body of stories in the Sword and Sorcery vein. Originally in *Unknown* and later in *Fantastic*, his polished tales of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser owed influence to Howard, but harked back to Smith in their use of understatement and sardonic dialogue. These tales combine the best of both kinds and have a very distinct flavour which I find most palatable. If Conan was the 'frontiersman,' then the Grey Mouser is the 'sharp operator'—for me, a much more interesting and subtle character.

There is a quality which most of these stories share in their construction. Dominant in the Gothic Romances of the two previous centuries was the picaresque theme—the quest theme which has been used as an effective vehicle for story-telling since earliest times. It is still the dominant kind of plot in

modern Sword and Sorcery tales. Dunsany used it, James Branch Cabell used it in his Poictesme stories such as *Jurgen*, Howard's overall theme for his Conan tales involves a wanderer with a curiosity to see all, Leiber utilises the theme rather less frequently, though again the overall theme of his Fafhrd/Grey Mouser tales is on the quest pattern. Tolkien of course has a highly involved picaresque theme, and this also applies to many of my own fantasy stories—typical examples being *While The Gods Laugh* or *To Rescue Tanelorn*.

For all some critics have said to the contrary, I am not a great Sword and Sorcery fan and find Howard and E.R. Burroughs in particular, virtually unreadable. One of my criticisms of all but Leiber is that the stuff is, like far too much S-F and Fantasy, emotionally unconvincing.

Fantasy writers are often called writers of 'adult fairy stories.' Most of them are not—they are writers of fairy stories for adults who still want to read fairy stories. There is nothing wrong in writing or reading fairy stories. There is something retarded, however, in the man who devotes himself wholly either to reading or to writing the stuff. The writer who merely recaptures the dream-worlds of childhood without adding to this what his adult mind has learned is an inadequate artist, if nothing else.

He may be an inadequate artist and a good stylist, like Dunsany or Bradbury or Tolkien, but if, as in the case of these, he cannot do more than recapture the wonders and terrors of infancy, he deserves to be regarded as we regard an infant prodigy—with admiration but not too much serious attention.

The label of emotional immaturity is an easy one to attach and is often applied these days, but I think it will stick in this case. This may be the reason why the appeal of Sword and Sorcery is on the whole to younger readers whose emotions are, understandably, not yet fully matured. What good it achieves, if any, is that it forms a useful bridge between childhood sense of wonder and adult sense of surrealism. However, that bridge seems to be infrequently crossed. People, to prolong the metaphor, sit down half-way over and stay there for the rest of their lives. This is bad for them.

The good Sword and Sorcery story should have something of the function of a moving-belt, perhaps, carrying the reader with it. The dream-worlds of these stories are worlds to which writer and reader initially escape. They leave *everything*

behind. The dream landscapes and structures the less limited writer discovers as he creates a story will soon be utilised for his own artistic purposes, if he has any. He will cease to be merely an escapist entertainer—he will apply his skill and understanding to making these worlds relevant to our own situation.

Few fantasy writers manage it. Peake has managed it in his *Titus Groan* trilogy and, I am pleased to say, so has Leiber in a slighter way with his ironic and delightful Grey Mouser stories. It is what I have tried to do in the Elric tales—evidently without much success since the less escapist themes I tried to carry on the Sword and Sorcery vehicle have escaped a great many readers. I shall have to try again with a fresh or altered vehicle.

If I had to list what I consider to be the best current developments of fantasy's various streams, they would be :

- (a) *Titus Groan* trilogy by Peake (representing the 'haunted palace').
- (b) *Two Sought Adventure* by Leiber (representing Sword and Sorcery).
- (c) *The Drowned World* by Ballard (representing S-F).
- (d) *The Naked Lunch* trilogy by William Burroughs (representing how the elements of Fantasy can be developed to push forward the progress of the novel).

The fantasy form has been progressing and refining itself for centuries. It has gone through various stages of borrowing from or influencing 'mainstream' fiction, and is currently starting a phase where it will once again both borrow and influence until at length it is absorbed, for a while, back into the mainstream. Fantasy (and in this I include Science Fiction) that does not do this—and most of it, of course, doesn't—will enjoy variations of ephemeral success but will finally wither, die and be forgotten. There are those who feel that fantasy fiction should remain an 'inland sea,' cut off from the mainstream. That 'inland sea' will fast turn into a stagnant pool, unless it is nourished by and is allowed in turn, to nourish the mainstream.

Science Fiction, therefore, is an offshoot of Fantasy. It has sub-categories in turn—many of its stories specialise in explaining away 'supernatural' phenomena, just as the Gothic often did. Others are fables or moral tales—satires, if you like—set somewhere in the galaxy or in the future instead of in

an 'unexplored' part of the globe like Lilliput. Many of them merely substitute ray-guns and Super Science for swords and sorcery, far-off planets for 'prehistoric' lands, and are, apart from their use of scientific instead of supernatural jargon, direct developments from the Gothic and earlier kinds of Fantasy. If Science Fiction's purpose is, as some say, to prepare people for possible eventualities in the future by detailing the probable influence that our technical progress will have on new generations, then it has largely failed. On the whole, I regard this claim as unsubstantiated. Much as I enjoy reading Science Fiction, I enjoy it for its moods, images and the fresh moods and images which they, in turn, create in me.

The fact is clear that S-F is a vein of Fantasy which has been more or less worked out.

To claim as many enthusiasts have done, that Fantasy is a 'branch' of Science Fiction is nonsense. This should now be obvious.

The limitations of Science Fiction nowadays are far greater than its possibilities. Today the better S-F stories are largely defeated by *being* S-F ! On the whole S-F themes are super-conventionally handled and this results in the ruin and 'conventionalisation' of whatever merit existed in the theme originally. Where else, for instance, would a story like Harry Harrison's *Streets of Ashkelon* be hailed as daringly unconventional, save in the super-conventional world of S-F ? With all due respect to writer and editor, this theme has been used in mainstream fiction in one way or another for years ! The fact is, of course, that the best S-F is not strictly S-F. The themes of *Case of Conscience*, *Canticle for Leibowitz* or *The Streets of Ashkelon*, if handled well, would carry infinitely more impact if put in a present-day setting ! S-F readers, writers and editors comprise, it appears, one of the most shockable sections of the modern reading public !

'Pure' Fantasy does not carry these limitations in anything like the same proportion. The 'other planets' of S-F possess, by definition, shape and dimensions. The fluid dream worlds of the Sword and Sorcery tale, say, do not carry the same limitations. As a *potential* form, then, the Sord and Sorcery story is the better bet as a vehicle for unconventional ideas.

Admittedly, fantasy fiction does not have the technical information and quasi-sociological themes of its currently more popular off-shoot and this is why, I think, its enthusiasts are

not so numerous. With his escapism, today's reader appears to want 'authentic' material information rather than the more abstract variety. He wants Defoe's laundry lists rather than Richardson's 'analysis of the human heart.' This is the only explanation, too, for the current popularity of an otherwise poor series of spy-thrillers which tell John Smith how to dress, what food to order, where to eat it, what kind of hand-made spark-plugs, size, weight, diameter etc., etc., to have in his expensive sports car, assuming he has the money. This emphasis on gadgets and their accompanying jargon is distasteful. But it is the only explanation for the current boom in S-F compared to the static or only gradually-awakening interest in experimental Fantasy. A reaction away from S-F towards Fantasy may already be taking place—but I could be thinking wishfully.

Now we come to what I think of as Fantasy and what you may have been considering as Science Fiction.

First I dismiss all talk of 'sociological' S-F and 'satirical' S-F as (as one critic has termed my own work) a load of old codswallop. Sociological-fiction or satirical-fiction or even fiction about the changing nature of man in a changing environment is, if presented as S-F limited by the very great limits of its chosen vehicle. If a writer's any damn good he doesn't need a gimmicky vehicle to carry his ideas.

J. G. Ballard prefers to call his published work 'speculative fantasy' and this, I feel, is a more apt term for the best of what is normally called Science Fiction. Yet Ballard's ideas about science are at best 20th century ideas—not the Victorian ideas involving machines and dials and plugs and pistons. They are in keeping with the experiments modern scientists are making in the realms of nuclear physics, neurology, psychology—experiments which are increasingly touching on the meta-physical so that to read the text of a modern scientific paper is sometimes like reading the sayings of some old Asian hermit. Yet Ballard prefers to think of his work as 'speculative fantasy.'

Speculative fantasy is also what Brian Aldiss, the other eminent British contributor to the field writes. Aldiss is less interested in abstracts than Ballard. His exceptionally good style and above all sympathetic interest in the human plight have combined to produce some excellent short stories.

Nowadays there is something horribly depressing, and earnest, and *dull* about the main body of work termed Science Fiction. Ballard and Aldiss stand far above the rest. They have realised the form's limitations but have not accepted them, have taken strides to cast them off. They have come up with stories like *Faceless Card* or *A Question of Re-Entry* which, while no means being Science Fiction, are extremely good stories that utilise the possibilities of the S-F tale without giving in to its heavy limitations. And, above all, these two writers are literate. No wonder they stand out.

Science Fiction as we know it sprang from the main body of fantastic fiction and must now, by degrees, ease back in again if it is to survive. It is doing this, it is learning that it cannot survive as an independent form. Fantastic fiction must in turn fertilise and be fertilised by the mainstream if it is to survive.

In the field of the magazines there have been two which have acted as outlets for the 'change over' story. One in America, one in Britain. The British magazine is *Science Fantasy*, the American is *Fantastic*. After this issue, we shall be left with one.

Science Fantasy has published a proportionately higher number of good stories than any other magazine to date. The comparative freedom allowed to the writer for this magazine has been greater than anywhere else. I only wish I could have written better stories for it while I had the chance.

It was not only my opinion that *Science Fantasy* was achieving a more literary and less prosaic tone in its choice of material. To some extent it had always possessed a more literary 'image' than any of its competitors.

In recent years with the publication of stories like *The Watchtowers*, *Where Is The Bird Of Fire?*, *Same Time, Same Place*, *Skeleton Crew* and many others, it has shown the uses to which Fantasy can be put, has done something more than entertain on an escapist level.

Perhaps this is why it was beginning to be thought, in this country and the States, the best of all the current magazines.

It has long been a maxim that the best doesn't sell as well as the worst.

Ironically, future analysis may show that *Science Fantasy's* very death was due to its emphasis on literate and literary writing rather than on gadgets and gimmicks.

—Michael Moorcock

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